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SECTION B

Vinyl Chloride

In past, some found hands damaged

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The polyvinyl manufacturing process that was cited recently as the probable cause of liver cancer in at least six B. F. Goodrich Co. workers has caused health problems of a less serious nature in the past.

In the late '50s and '60s, some of those who cleaned the large vessels in which the plastic is made at the company's Bella Lane plant experienced severe damage to bones in their fingertips.

For some, the blood circulation into the fingers was markedly reduced, their fingers got shorter and started clubbing. Their fingernails began to curve around the ends of the shortened fingers.

During the worst stages of the disease, X rays of the fingertips show little evidence of any bone.

Some of the workers also experienced thickened skin, particularly on their arms.

In all, 31 employees who cleaned the vessels experienced some damage to their hands, according to a company report that appeared in the Journal of the American Medical Association in 1967.

Company officials say eight or nine of the men with hand problems worked in the Bella Lane plant. The rest worked at other Goodrich plants.

The manufacturing process has been changed and the cleaners now wear plastic or rubber-coated gloves instead of leather ones, apparently eliminating the problem. No hand problems have surfaced recently.

Company officials say they are still unsure what caused the disease. They say attempts to reproduce it in laboratory animals failed.

But those who experienced the trouble still have short fingers and occasionally are bothered by poor blood circulation in them.

In a case involving Bernard Skaggs,

Two more victims have been added to the list of B. F. Goodrich employees known to have contracted an extremely rare form of liver cancer, Page A 1.

who lives in Pleasure Ridge Park, all of his fingers were affected except one ring finger. When he held his two ring fingers together last week one of them appeared to be a quarter of an inch to half an inch shorter than the other.

The 1967 report in the medical journal says Goodrich workers began complaining of the problem in 1964, and the company started investigating whether the problem might be job-related.

Skaggs said he started noticing something was happening to his hands before he had completed his first year on his job, which included cleaning the plastic-manufacturing tanks.

Starting with the changes in his hands in 1955, he said, his wife started asking him to see a physician. But he didn't then.

"It kept coming on but it was so slow that you get used to it and just keep going," he said.

But by 1959, he added, it had gotten "so bad that I went to a doctor down in the country."

The doctor told him it might be something he was working in and referred him to the company doctor. After going through a number of doctors he learned that the blood was not circulating in his hands properly and the fingertip bones were severely damaged.

"I wasn't feeling bad except that my hands were swollen so bad that I couldn't open or close them completely and the ends of my fingers were so sore that I couldn't button my clothes or dial a phone," Skaggs said.

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"Of course that didn't convince me; I always felt it was something to do with work. But I couldn't get the doctors even interested in checking it out."

After a four-month stay in Veterans Hospital in Louisville in 1959, Skaggs went back to the "poly cleaning" job.

He said that by that time other workers were having hand problems.

By 1962, Skaggs said, he had enough seniority to bid on a day-work job, and "I got out and began to get some better."

Skaggs eventually got together with other employees suffering the same malady and they filed for workmen's compensation. The company paid the claims without contest.

Skaggs said he is no longer bothered a great deal by his short fingers. The bones have "knit back together pretty well."

"It's hard to pick up little objects because they're stubby, and I just don't have the touch," he said. "Just this morning I had three fingers turn white as a ghost. It happens all the time in the winter."

"There's not any pain to it - they just kind of get numb and look like a dead person's fingers. I don't think there's a drop of blood in them."

Skaggs added that he has had "six or seven" blood clots removed from his hands since 1962.

Tests have shown that Skaggs' liver is normal but this past summer he was again hospitalized with a pancreas condition.

"The doctors say that as far as they know the chemicals are not causing it," he said. "But who can really say?"

"I've got a pretty good job out there. I wouldn't want the place shut down because that's where I've made my living for the last 18 years. It's important to make a living but health is important, too. If you can't live, you don't need to

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