

Jobs that kill

Sidney Harris



Only sterile women need apply

By Dorothy McGhee
Pacific News Service

When Vicky Read, a 22-year-old resident of Coraopolis, Pa., saw an ad announcing that a nearby zinc mineral plant was hiring women, she jumped at the chance to earn \$4.70 an hour. With her handicapped husband out of work and with a small child to support, her income of \$2.50 an hour at a local hospital was just not enough.

"They didn't tell us it might be dangerous," Read says, "and I just figured it was a chance to get a good job. All I knew was that my father worked there [St. Joes Mineral in Monaca, Pa.], and my uncle, and my grandfather before he died of lung cancer."

At St. Joes Read was assigned to what they call the roaster department, one of several processing plants in which the company uses lead to produce zinc and acid.

"It's very dirty and hot," Read says. "It's over 100 degrees at all times. It's dirty up to your knees and it's all in the air. You have to wear respirators, but even that doesn't help a whole lot. You can smell the gas. It burns your nose and throat. It's common knowledge that you can get sick working in there, but no one likes to talk about it."

About three months after she started working in the roaster department, the company called together the 17 women who were employed in the processing plants and told them they were being transferred because high exposure to lead in the plants could be dangerous if they became pregnant.

"They told us," Read recalls, "that if we wanted to have our tubes tied or have a hysterectomy or something like that, that would be perfectly all right and we could stay where we were. The only way we could get in the plants any more was to have papers from the doctor saying

we could not have children."

The women were told they would be transferred at the end of the month to the labor pool, where they would be assigned to janitorial and yard work at reduced pay.

"I was very upset," Read says. "It meant a reduction in pay and nowhere to bid for upgraded jobs under the union seniority system, because there's not too many places to work in that mill that aren't exposed to lead. I really needed to work."

A million women exposed.

Until she was transferred, Vicky Read was one of an estimated one million women, according to HEW, in their prime child-bearing years who work amid potential exposures to chemical substances and processes that can cause birth defects and miscarriages.

Now she is one of an untold number of women around the country who are losing their jobs, or being excluded from jobs, because they are pregnant or capable of becoming pregnant. Other women are undergoing tubular ligations or hysterectomies to keep those jobs.

A bizarre confrontation is emerging between working women's rights to a safe workplace under the broad provisions of the 1970 Occupational Safety and Health Act, and their rights to equal employment opportunities under the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

In the lead and zinc industries and in virtually all smelters, fertile women are being transferred or dismissed from processing plants with high exposure levels to lead. Goodyear, DuPont and General Motors have removed women from areas of high exposure in their battery plants.

Scores of new cases of sex discrimination are cropping up. In Muncie, Ind., GM is being sued by a woman who was

denied employment because she was capable of having children.

At the Bunkerhill Foundry in Idaho and at St. Joes Mineral in Pennsylvania at least four women have undergone hysterectomies or tubular ligations in order to keep their jobs. Other women, preferring to remain fertile, have been transferred, often at a loss of pay and job seniority.

Fear of suits from children.

Exposure to lead is not the only problem. The petrochemical industry is becoming nervous about female employees who work with benzene. Exxon and Dow Chemical will no longer hire fertile women for jobs involving exposure to that chemical.

At Amoco, women employees must immediately report a missed menstrual period to the company physician; one woman was fired at Amoco's Sugar Creek facility for failing to give timely notice of her pregnancy.

In the plastics industry corporate managements are worried about the effects of vinyl chloride on fertile women. Laboratories using radiation have begun dismissing pregnant employees.

A female research technician in a thyroid laboratory in Illinois was told to resign or take a maternity leave of absence without pay. Afraid to lose both her salary and unemployment benefits, she accepted dismissal.

Industry's sudden concern for the health and safety of developing fetuses is prompted primarily by the prospect of having a deformed child bring suit. As one Dow Chemical official put it, "We'd rather face an action by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission than a deformed child."

Workers' compensation, which acts as a sort of no-fault insurance for employees injured on the job by compensating them but limiting their right to sue, does not cover birth defects or spontaneous abortions. The fetus is not covered, so anyone can bring suit until the age of 21, claiming to be deformed because his or her mother was exposed to a dangerous substance.

"The only redress of the damaged child would be a civil action, almost equivalent to medical malpractice," explains John Finklea, director of the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). "The mother cannot sign a release for the fetus, and liability will accumulate as research is being done. This, it seems to me, will be a powerful lever for everyone to get to work on this problem."

Industry's way of "getting to work" has been primarily to exclude women from areas of risk.

Little government help.

Nor has the Labor department's Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), charged by law with making it possible for Vicky Read and other working Americans to hold jobs without jeopardizing their health, been of much help.

Through the development of standards called threshold limit values (TLVs) OSHA is responsible for setting permissible levels of harmful substances in the workplace—levels at which, according to available evidence, workers may be regularly ex-

posed to toxic substances without adverse effects. OSHA, however, has set TLVs for fewer than 500 of the 19,000 toxic substances in common industrial use, and for only 16 of the 2,400 chemicals suspected to be carcinogenic by its research arm.

Even where standards have been set, OSHA has not been equipped to enforce them. As of 1976 Congress had provided funds sufficient to allow OSHA an inspection force capable of examining only 2 percent of the nation's workplaces. Fewer than 4 percent of America's five million workplaces have had first-time inspections, according to Ralph Nader's Health Research Group. And only 400 of OSHA's 1,500 inspectors are trained to conduct the sophisticated investigations that are necessary to pinpoint carcinogenic chemicals or those that might cause birth defects.

New lead standard.

OSHA is now considering a revised standard for exposure to lead, since recent medical evidence suggests that the current standard allows concentrations of exposure that could cause miscarriages. The proposed revision, which is expected to be issued by the end of the year, allows for half the exposure level currently permissible, and it promises a substantially diminished risk of miscarriage.

But the lead industry calls the proposed revision unduly restrictive and far too costly. Industry spokesmen maintain that smelters across the country will be forced out of business if the revision is adopted.

Proponents of the lower standard, however, contend its adoption would signal the government's commitment to equal opportunity for women. Olga Madar, president of the Coalition of Labor Union Women, testified at recent OSHA hearings, "Industry prefers excluding a group with a problem rather than dealing with it. After the fertile women are removed, who will be next? Black workers who carry the sickle-cell anemia trait in their blood? Older male workers who have the highest probability of heart problems? The list of groups with special susceptibility goes on and on, until a strain of superworkers has been bred."

Men, however, are not superworkers, and there is growing evidence that the reproductive organs of male workers might also be adversely affected by toxic substances and processes. Foreign studies suggest that an unusually high number of male workers have abnormal sperm test results after exposure to lead. Women whose husbands have been exposed to vinyl chloride have an unusually high incidence of still births and miscarriages.

At St. Joes Mineral in Monaca, according to Vicky Read, the men are not complacent about the dangers. "The men are aware," she says, "that lead can hurt them, and it upsets them. They can't understand why the company is concerned about us women and not about them. Why don't they have a case of discrimination against the company? They have to work in the dirty places and we don't."

Dorothy McGhee, formerly publisher of Washington Newsworks, writes frequently about health and consumer issues for national publications, including the Progressive, where a longer version of this article appeared.

Losing your job is also hazardous

By Martin Brown
Pacific News Service

Many of the 19,000 or more workers laid off in recent months by giant steel companies can be expected to suffer physically, as well as economically, because of their job loss.

They run a higher risk of heart disease, ulcers, arthritis, hypertension, flu and other ailments associated with emotional

stress than they did before they lost their jobs.

That job lay-offs carry hidden health costs for the workers is shown in a study soon to be released by the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health. Conducted by Drs. Stanislav Kasl, professor of epidemiology and public health at the Yale School of Medicine, and Sidney Cobb, professor of community health

at Brown University, the study investigated health effects of long or permanent layoffs on 200 workers of two large industrial plants.

The findings may be particularly relevant for workers currently laid off in Youngstown, Ohio; Lackawanna, N.Y.; Johnstown, Pa., and other iron and steel centers. (ITT, Oct. 5 and Oct. 12.)

"The situation is quite comparable—layoffs due to plant shutdowns," Dr. Kasl says.

Workers who were older, had been employed longest and were in poor health were hit harder than younger and healthier workers with a short work history at the plant, the study found. Kasl and Cobb's two-year study focused on married men aged 35 to 59 who had at least five years' seniority and a long history of stable work experience.

A significant number of these men suffered physical stress symptoms from the time they were anticipating job loss, until after they were rehired.

They showed high levels of uric acid, associated with arthritis; high pulse and blood pressure and blood cholesterol levels, associated with hypertension and heart disease.

A high frequency of hypertension was observed. There was a high level of peptic ulcers, including flare-ups of old ulcers. Minor ailments also were more frequent among the unemployed men than in a control group of industrial employees who still had jobs. Wives of the unemployed also showed a high incidence of ulcers.

To avert such health problems Dr. Kasl recommends programs that offer emotional support. These should involve the family, the union, the company and the community, he says.

Yet he and Dr. Cobb found that layoffs usually mean abandonment by the union, the company and the loss of other support groups.

The study recommends that companies and government cooperate to prevent sud-

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den job terminations for thousands of workers and, instead, set up job phase-out and retraining and re-employment programs that allow gradual transitions and prevent needless stress.

Martin Brown, science editor of PNS, teaches at the University of California at Berkeley.

While Shell may not have ignored the guidelines, the company-sponsored study's unscientific arbitrariness is suspicious. During testing of DBCP, rats and other animals showed tissue alteration at 5 ppm. But never did the scientists test for consequences at exposures below 5 ppm. They took a calculated risk that 1 ppm would be safe.

The consequences of their decision have to be borne by the workers who have unknowingly handled DBCP since production began in 1954.

Little recourse for workers.

Fertility measurement is a matter of contention in the scientific community. All researchers agree that fertility depends on the production and mobility of spermatozoa as well as hormonal secretions. But some scientists say anything below 20 million is abnormal and others say anything below 40 million is. The company naturally favors the 20 million figure.

This gripes Rafael Moure. As the industrial hygienist for the OCAW International, he is deeply involved with the DBCP problem. The company seems worried more about limiting its liability than about its employees' health and safety, he says, adding that it's hard to believe that Shell officials are saying "It's not that bad; we can't say it's sterility."

Workers in Denver who find they are sterile, by whoever's measurement, will have little recourse in the courts. Not only can they not sue Shell, they cannot get workmen's compensation because the law requires that to be compensable, job-

caused "injuries" must interfere with the employee's ability to work.

The union may lobby to have the state law changed, but the GOP-dominated legislature is considered unsympathetic.

For Elliott and other veteran Shell Chemical workers, cancer is the chief concern now. OCAW wants the government to establish a long-term medical program to monitor past and present employees for the incidence of cancer, which can take 20 to 40 years to appear.

The OCAW has taken a prominent role in defending the rights of its members to safety in this matter. Union pressure led the government to pass "emergency temporary standards" for DBCP manufacture—10 parts per billion—that will effectively prevent the chemical industry from resuming DBCP production. The union also fought hard to obtain company-held results of the fertility test and convinced NIOSH to monitor those tests.

But some workers are afraid if they pressure too hard they may convince Shell to close its aging Denver plant. Said one worker, "It's common knowledge that if Shell gets too much heat, it'll shut a plant down." Hanson said he knew of no instance when Shell had done that.

A footnote to this story of company indifference shows that the DBCP issue may not go away even if another drop of the stuff is never produced. An ominous Canadian study found DBCP residue of 2 ppm on commercially marketable radishes and somewhat lesser concentrations on other root vegetables.

Timothy Lange is a writer in Denver.

Shell workers misled on sterility

By Timothy Lange

DENVER—Increasing evidence gives little doubt that a pesticide called 1,2 dibromo-3-chloropropane—DBCP—is the cause of sterility among some men who worked with it (ITT, Aug. 31). But the Shell Chemical Company, which together with the Dow Chemical Company manufactured 20 to 25 million pounds of DBCP annually, continues to minimize the potential risk faced by employees who came into contact with the pesticide during its 23 years of production.

DBCP is used to protect vegetables and other crops from roundworms, primarily in the South and in California. In June an extraordinary high number of workers who blended DBCP with other chemicals at the Occidental Chemical Company in Lathrop, Calif., were discovered to be sterile or to have marginal sperm counts.

Because fertility tests are uncompleted, up-to-date figures are difficult to obtain. But in Denver, where Shell made DBCP under the brand name Nemagon until last year, 36 men had been tested as of Sept. 17. Of those, at least 10, and perhaps as many as 24, showed abnormal sperm counts.

All inquiries about DBCP are now routed to Shell's Houston office. The public relations representative there, Richard Hanson, said last week that he is "extremely impressed with the moral standards of Shell," the "zeal" with which the company investigates medical problems and its "erring on the side of safety."

But in a Sept. 1 memorandum to employees Shell's company doctor, R.E. Joyner, was quoted as saying, "The data to date is insufficient to draw conclusions concerning fertility or to establish cause

and effect relationships." Dr. Joyner also told officials at the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) that the company has been unable to establish a "significant correlation between length of individual exposure and sperm count."

Failure to notify workers.

Most indicative of Shell's attitude is the company's failure to notify its employees about test results that demonstrated a clear link between exposure to DBCP and sterility.

First evidence of this link appeared in 1954 in an internal paper submitted by researchers hired by Shell. Conclusions of that paper and tests commissioned by Dow were published in a toxicological journal in 1961. But it was not until after the Lathrop tests became known that Shell workers learned what the company had known all along. Even then, their local of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers (OCAW) had to pressure the company to get their own fertility tests started.

Hanson said he has convinced the corporate hierarchy that in the future workers should be apprised of the results of all tests conducted on Shell-produced chemicals. But he denied the implication that the company had ignored the 1961 study of DBCP. The company, he said, had followed all the study's suggested guidelines, including a recommendation that air in the DBCP-production areas not rise above 1 part per million (ppm). During manufacture, DBCP in the air averaged .2 ppm to .6 ppm, well within the guidelines, he said.

Women have job safety concerns

By Andrea Gunderson and Jane Melnick

CHICAGO—A group of 6,000 peach growers recently suggested that people who don't want children, who are already sterile, or who want to "get around certain religious strictures" against birth control should volunteer to work in peach groves sprayed with pesticides that have been revealed to cause sterility.

This example of managerial ingenuity

was cited by Carl Carlson, chairman of the Chicago Area Committee on Occupational Safety and Health—CACOSH—at the opening of a conference in early October on occupational safety and health and women workers. The conference, "All in a Day's Work" was cosponsored by several unions and health groups and brought over 200 people together for speeches and workshops on occupational

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