

Industry study withheld data on carcinogen -report

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By Deborah Zabarenko

WASHINGTON, Feb 26 (Reuters) - Workplace watchdogs and industry advocates agree: too much hexavalent chromium -- the same chemical at the heart of the movie "Erin Brockovich" -- puts people at risk for lung cancer. But how much is too much?

The U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration is set to rule on that on Tuesday. But in the run-up to the decision, the journal Environmental Health reported that industry-commissioned scientists withheld data suggesting even small amounts of the known carcinogen, which is used in the steel, aerospace, electroplating and industries, can be deadly.

"We think we have an example in which all of the standard elements of scientific distortion are present: hiding behind the lawyers, statistical manipulation, failure to publish ... all that kind of stuff which comes right out of the tobacco industry playbook," said Dr. Peter Lurie, one of the report's authors.

Kate McMahon-Lohrer, an attorney at the firm Collier Shannon Scott and counsel for the industry group Chromium Coalition, vehemently disagreed with the Environmental Health report.

"That charge is absolutely and completely false and it's outrageous and libelous," she said.

In a telephone interview, McMahon-Lohrer acknowledged that hexavalent chromium raises workers' cancer risk at high doses, but said there was debate about the risk from low doses. She denied any industry-sponsored research was withheld from OSHA.

David Michaels, who heads the project on scientific knowledge and public policy at George Washington University and was a senior author of the report, said studies commissioned by a chromium industry group showed even low doses elevate cancer risk.

"Industry had commissioned a study which looked at newer facilities where exposures were much better-controlled and that study showed that workers with relatively low exposure to hexavalent chromium had greatly increased risk of lung cancer," Michaels said by telephone.

HIDDEN DATA

"Industry criticized OSHA for not having data about the effects of low-level exposure, when industry in fact had that data and was hiding it," Michaels said.

The film "Erin Brockovich" focused on the dangers of contact with hexavalent chromium, also known as chromium VI, through polluted water. The current matter deals with airborne chromium VI that some 380,000 U.S. workers might inhale on the job.

At present, there is no OSHA standard for how much chromium is acceptable in American factories; the only standard that exists dates from 1943, when the maximum on-the-job dose was set to prevent "nasal perforation" and skin irritations.

That 63-year-old standard is 52 micrograms per cubic meter of air. In 2004, OSHA proposed a standard of 1 microgram per cubic meter, and has been collecting data on it since then, from industry and other groups. The watchdog group Public Citizen asked for a 0.25 microgram per cubic meter level.

OSHA estimated that a 1 microgram level would cause two to nine excess deaths for every 1,000 workers exposed during their lifetimes, above the agency's target of one excess death per 1,000 workers.

If the level is raised to 5 micrograms, OSHA estimated it would cause five to 45 excess deaths for every 1,000 workers.

An OSHA spokesperson declined to comment about what the decision might be, except to say the agency expected to meet the Tuesday deadline, as ordered by a federal court.

Michaels said the issue is broader than the chromium VI case.

"I'm hoping that the entire system rethinks the role of industry in providing scientific data," he said. "I'd like to see rules that say ... if industry participates in regulatory proceedings, they have an obligation to provide all relevant data, not just the data that supports their position."

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