

A Firing over Formaldehyde

For saying that formaldehyde is a human carcinogen, a government scientist finds himself under notice to quit

On 2 June, the Formaldehyde Institute's attorney, S. John Byington, wrote an angry letter to a high official at the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), assailing the conduct of one of the agency's top scientists. Referring to OSHA epidemiologist Peter F. Infante, Byington demanded to know, "How do you control members of the bureaucracy who seem to be operating freely within and without government?" Four weeks later, Infante, who maintains that formaldehyde is a potential human carcinogen—an opinion that industry disputes—received notice that he was to be fired.

Infante's proposed dismissal was immediately labeled as "politically motivated" by Representative Albert Gore (D-Tenn.) who heads the House science and technology investigations subcommittee. At hearings held 15 and 16 July on Infante's proposed departure, Gore said, "If OSHA succeeds in firing Dr. Infante, it will be a clear message to all civil servants who are charged with protecting the public health that those who do their job will lose their job." Critics of OSHA under the new Administration contend that the Infante firing is a clear signal that the agency is a handmaiden to industry. Infante, head of OSHA's office that identifies carcinogens, charges that OSHA is denying him the freedom of scientific expression.

Infante's troubles began when he wrote a highly critical letter 12 May to John Higginson, director of the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC), a branch of the World Health Organization. In the letter, Infante contested a recent decision by an agency panel which concluded there was insufficient evidence to call formaldehyde an animal carcinogen. Infante, clearly irritated, declared that the panel must not have been familiar with its own criteria for classifying cancer agents.

Insulted by Infante's criticisms, Higginson fired off a letter to the head of OSHA, Thorne G. Auchter. Infante was "casting aspersions on the competence and objectivity" of the panel, he wrote. Furthermore, the tone of Infante's letter "appears to be an attempt by a United States regulatory agency to influence the decisions of this organization."

OSHA paid serious attention to the

complaints from Higginson and Byington of the Formaldehyde Institute. Earlier this year, Mark Cowan, a special assistant to Auchter, had met with Byington and another institute attorney, who explained that, in their opinion, animal and epidemiological studies showed that formaldehyde did not pose a cancer risk to humans. (Under the Carter Adminis-



Infante: "Does politics change science?"

tration, OSHA classified the chemical as a potential risk.) After the meeting, Cowan, a lawyer, wrote a confidential memorandum to Auchter, saying that there "is more than a scintilla of doubt" about formaldehyde's alleged cancer risk. Cowan continued, "... the evidence currently available is, at best, conflicting, at worst, biased. . . ."

The Formaldehyde Institute has similarly persuaded the Heritage Foundation, the conservative think tank which has had particular influence in the Reagan Administration. Foundation president Edwin Feulner wrote in a March column distributed to 1440 small- to middle-size newspapers that the formaldehyde industries "may find themselves in a deep pickle—all because the un-Reaganized Consumer Product Safety Commission wants to ban formaldehyde." Feulner complained that federal agencies may decide to regulate formaldehyde more closely even though epidemiological studies have "all given the chemical a clean bill of health."

"Because of its funny name and foul smell, formaldehyde may not seem like something we should care much about

... [but] formaldehyde is too useful a product to be lost to the American economy," Feulner concluded.

The formaldehyde industry is a multi-million dollar business. According to 1978 figures from the Consumer Product Safety Commission, more than 6 billion pounds of formaldehyde are produced annually at a value between \$285 million and \$350 million. The versatile substance is used in the manufacturing of particle board, plywood, urea-formaldehyde foam insulation, resins, preservatives, and embalming fluids. It also keeps the "press" in permanent press fabrics.

"Its use is so diversified that there is a potential for exposure in a number of occupation, environmental and consumer settings," says a recent report by the National Academy of Sciences. Indeed, the government estimates that 1.6 million workers were exposed to formaldehyde in 1974. The academy report says that 11 million people live in mobile homes that are constructed largely from plywood and particle board which release formaldehyde vapors. The government has already received more than 1600 health complaints related to formaldehyde foam insulation.

Given the ubiquity of formaldehyde, Infante says he felt compelled to write Higginson. Now he finds himself on the verge of being ousted from his \$50,000 a year job on the grounds that (i) he misrepresented the agency by writing Higginson on OSHA stationery and (ii) he was insubordinate to his superiors who allegedly told him that the agency had changed its mind on formaldehyde.

According to several key scientists, who have written to Infante in his support, including Eula Bingham, Auchter's predecessor at OSHA, it is common practice for government scientists to write other researchers using the agency letterhead. As for the charge of insubordination, Infante claims that he was never informed that OSHA had switched its position.

With the exception of the IARC panel, there is a substantial measure of scientific agreement that formaldehyde is a potential human carcinogen. Last fall, a panel comprised of 17 scientists from seven different federal agencies, including OSHA, reported to the Consumer Product Safety Commission that formal-