

008

Editorials • Comments • Valley Log • Obituaries

# Chip worker injuries underreported

By Mitchel Benson  
Mercury News Environment Writer

Only 60 percent of all the work-related injuries and illnesses suffered at semiconductor manufacturing plants are reported to federal occupational health officials, a University of California researcher said Thursday.

"We found a consistent tendency to underrecord work-related illnesses," a team of UC-Davis researchers wrote in a 72-

page report that studied semiconductor manufacturing plants across the country.

Though 1984 records were inspected at only 10 sites in six states, including California, "it looks like the completeness of recording across the industry — this is a broad-based study — is about 60 percent," said Dr. Stephen McCurdy of the UC-Davis School of Medicine.

The cases that went unreported to the federal Occupational Safety and Health

Administration included mostly minor injuries such as acid burns on fingers, allergies to new work gloves, blisters from new work shoes, numerous eye injuries and various cuts, sprains and bruises.

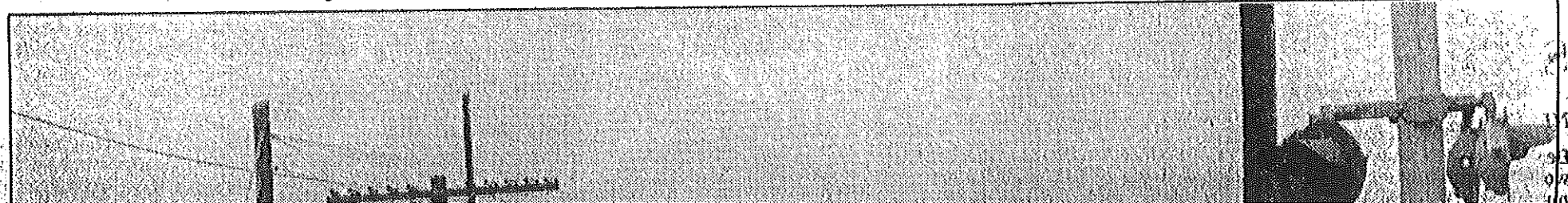
Even so, the question of how many and which injuries and illnesses are reported is important because OSHA officials use those records to assess the relative safety of different industries and the need for

See REPORT, Page 2B

**That knocks out the basis for the . . . claims that they have been a safe industry.**

— Ted Smith, Toxics Coalition

## Somebody should call a cop



# Study: Work injuries underreported

conductor manufacturing industry's own health record-keeping system "is most accurate and best for injuries. . . . But a whole other class of disorders — occupational illnesses — may not be recognized as occupationally related because there's a long time lag between the exposure that caused them and the disease that results."

One of the investigators' recommendations is that the SIA not try to use its record-keeping system to look for patterns in workers of cancer, birth defects and other problems that might take a long time to develop. Instead, they recommended that SIA conduct specific, focused studies.

In fact, the SIA is sponsoring just such a comprehensive study of the long-term health risks faced by semiconductor workers. The study, in response to the Massachusetts study, is expected to begin early next year and take 2½ years and \$2 million to \$4 million to complete.

to assess the potential health effects of the substances before they are brought into widespread industrial use.

A small study made public last year found an increased rate of miscarriages among chip production workers at a Massachusetts plant. Though its findings have been disputed, it has heightened concern about chip workers' health.

Smith of the toxics coalition said his concern was not injuries among semiconductor workers but those illnesses from exposure to chemicals that might take a long time to surface and might reveal themselves with subtle symptoms.

"Other industries don't handle the extent and the amount of toxic chemicals that this one does," Smith said. "And that's why (reporting illnesses) is important here."

McCurdy agreed that the semi-

and illnesses. Overall, the team of UC-Davis researchers led by Dr. Marc Schenker concluded that the SIA system is a "valuable, ongoing . . .

But the researchers found what they said were several major weaknesses in the record-keeping system, begun in 1982. Among other things, they said it "does not completely or consistently record" those occupational illnesses that have subtle symptoms or that take a long time to develop.

"The researchers, like others before them, pointed out that despite the use of extremely toxic materials in the chip manufacturing business, there is little scientific information on the health of production workers.

One reason is that manufacturing processes and the hazardous chemicals used in those processes change rapidly and frequently. As a consequence, the report said, there is frequently not enough time

REPORT, from Page 1B

Ted Smith, executive director of the environmentalist Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition, said the study shows that the chip manufacturing industry — which employs an estimated 50,000 people in Santa Clara County — is not as safe as officials say it is.

"That knocks out the basis for the Semiconductor Industry Association's claims that they have been a safe industry," Smith said. "And I think they're probably feeling pretty embarrassed at this time and maybe wishing they never commissioned the report."

But industry representatives, who spent an estimated \$80,000 on the two-year effort, said they were pleased with the study's results.

"The report is a valuable contribution to our continuing efforts to improve the accuracy of health and safety statistics in our industry," said Andrew Proccassini, president of the SIA.

And he agreed with one of the UC-Davis researchers who said it was incorrect to assume the semiconductor industry's reporting was any better or worse than that of other industries.

"There's this tremendously expensive federal system for collecting this data . . . that has never been tested," McCurdy said. "Nobody knows what the recording completeness is in any other industry," manufacturing or what have you.

"The researchers found no indications that company health clinics were intentionally underreporting injuries or illnesses. Instead, they believe that clinic workers might have been confused by OSHA's guidelines for what did and did not need to be recorded.

"The current definitions for occupational injuries and illnesses

chip workers

1/8/79/10

The researchers found no indications that company health clinics were intentionally underreporting injuries or illnesses. Instead, they believe that clinic workers might have been confused by OSHA's guidelines for what did and did not need to be recorded.

"The current definitions for occupational injuries and illnesses . . . are not consistent with a medical, biological or common-sense understanding of health and disease," the study said.

The purpose of the UC-Davis study was to examine the accuracy and usefulness of the SIA's own system for collecting and keeping track of information on injuries