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Editorials

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Miscarriage study

The extent of participation by the chip makers' group will measure its sincerity

THE U.S. semiconductor industry has reached a crucial juncture in formulating a response to a potentially serious health threat confronting chip production workers.

A Semiconductor Industry Association task force has concluded that a broad investigation of employee miscarriages in the industry should be undertaken. The conclusion follows review of a study that found an unusually high rate of miscarriage among workers at a Digital Equipment Corp. plant in Massachusetts.

A second task force has been appointed to present the SIA's board of directors with research options. A spokesman for the Cupertino-based trade organization, which represents most U.S. chip makers, says the new task force should finish its work by May 31, with the board taking action shortly thereafter.

So far, we find nothing to fault in the industry's reaction to the Digital Equipment study, which also reported a "general malaise" among chip production workers. However, it is one thing to express concern about a situation and another to do something about it.

What sort of action the industry finally undertakes will say much about the sincerity of its concern.

The SIA already has backed away from a broad-based in-house study. Not only would the impartiality of such a study be open to question, it claims, but it could be mistakenly identified with chip makers not affiliated with the trade group.

We're willing to concede those points. At the same time, we hope the industry's leaders realize that too little involvement by the trade association would vitiate the impact of any study.

Having an outside group undertake the scientific work would be a good way to eliminate doubts about impartiality. The Digital Equipment study was conducted by the University of Massachusetts School of Public Health. Participation by a university or government agency is something the SIA task force should look into.

An alternative would be to leave further investigation to individual companies — to pursue or not pursue as they saw fit. But for the SIA to do that would be to duck its responsibility.

The association may not represent the entire U.S. chip industry, but it represents most of it. It can play an invaluable role in drumming up financial support for, and helping coordinate, the kind of broad investigation called for under the present circumstances.

Last December, we commended the chip industry and its members for their prompt initial response to the Digital Equipment study. The industry now needs to translate its avowed good intentions into an effective plan of action.