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Group won't conduct chip-miscarriage study

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The semiconductor industry's trade association has decided, at least for now, against an industrywide study of whether chip workers' exposure to toxic materials causes miscarriages.

Instead, the Cupertino-based Semiconductor Industry Association says that companies should perform their own studies, SIA board member and Intel Corp. Vice Chairman Robert Noyce said Thursday.

That decision, which was reached at an SIA board meeting Wednesday in Washington drew criticism from environmental

and health advocates. A state epidemiologist said Thursday that company-by-company studies couldn't produce conclusive results.

A push to study the miscarriage issue began last year. University of Massachusetts researchers reported that female workers on a Digital Equipment Corp. chip production line in Hudson, Mass., suffered twice the miscarriage rate of other women at the plant. Chip industry executives have criticized the study as being seriously flawed.

An SIA task force recommended to SIA directors Wednesday that an industrywide

study be undertaken, said spokeswoman Sheila Sandow. But directors tabled that idea, she said, in favor of recommending further study by the task force.

"No definite action for an SIA study was taken primarily because we felt if it was SIA-sponsored, it would be tainted," Noyce said in an interview. It was "left to individual companies. We're going to work on doing additional studies, but it won't be an SIA-wide study."

Worker advocates criticized chip makers for dodging responsibility to their employees.

"The industry's failure to take a lead in calling for a study, I think, indicates they're putting their profits ahead of the safety of their workers," said Meta Mendel-Reyes, director of the San Jose-based Santa Clara Center for Occupational Safety and Health.

Ted Smith, chairman of the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition, acknowledged the SIA's concerns about objectivity if the trade group sponsored a study. But, he said, "there are easy and obvious ways you can do a study with sufficient credibility." Chief among them would be to conduct a

study under the auspices of the state health department or the University of California.

"It sounds to me that what's going on is they ran into internal opposition and decided to punt," Smith said. "The impartiality thing is a cover story."

But Noyce denied the chip makers were ducking responsibility.

"Rather than that, the SIA has said we can't do it with SIA sponsorship," he said. "It must be with a medical group sponsorship. What you'd like to do is have the NIH

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(National Institutes of Health) or somebody else come in and do it, so it isn't tainted and the data would be believed."

Nevertheless, the SIA has not tried to arrange such a study, he said.

The chief strike against a company-by-company approach is that such studies typically wouldn't include enough workers to be statistically significant, researchers said Wednesday.

Lower levels may be missed

Because of the way statistical methods work, "the fewer the individuals that are in any one study, the less the chance there is of an adequate ability ... to detect risk," said Dr. Linda Rudolph, a state occupational health physician. "With fewer people, you don't have as great a chance of detecting lower levels of risk, which still may be significant."

What's more, it's more difficult to conduct uniform studies among different companies, said Shanna Swan, a chief in the state's epidemiological studies section. "If you have a number of different studies being done, first of all you'll get different answers, and none of them will be conclusive."

Nevertheless, company-by-company studies would offer some advantages, said John Greenagel, a spokesman for Advanced Micro Devices Inc. in Sunnyvale. Among other things, information could be collected more quickly and it would be easier to control variables that could affect results, he said.

'Complex study'

"No matter which way it's done, it's going to be a very complex study to do," he said. "Either way, it's going to be very costly."

Both state officials said that to balance an industrywide approach would be better.

"The fact that this is a sensitive and emotional issue, around which there has been a lot of publicity, increases the importance of doing as strong and as valid a study as can be done," Rudolph said.