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IBM Warns Workers on Chemicals and Miscarriages

Chronicle Staff and Wire Reports

New York

IBM has warned its workers and other companies that two chemicals widely used in manufacturing semiconductor chips — and in other industries — may significantly increase the risk of miscarriage.

The computer maker acted after a study it commissioned by health researchers at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore found that of 30 women who worked with the chemicals at two IBM plants and then became pregnant, 10 had miscarriages — a 33.3 percent rate.

Despite the small number of pregnancies affected, the researchers believe there is a significant relationship between contact with the chemicals and the miscarriages.

The two chemicals, diethylene glycol dimethyl ether and ethylene glycol monethyl ether acetate, are

used as solvents in chip-making.

"The warning is a reflection of our increased understanding of the hazards of these chemicals," said James Cone, an expert in toxic chemicals and an assistant clinical professor at the University of California at San Francisco. "People have touted these as a safe alternative to chlorofluorocarbons and other chemicals, but we're finding out that there may be problems here as well."

Based on the study's findings, a number of other technology companies have issued similar warnings in recent weeks. The chemicals are also used in other industries, such as aerospace and printing, where thousands of workers may have come in contact with them.

Alternative Jobs

There were conflicting reports yesterday over whether some of the companies have stopped using

such chemicals. Several chip makers have decided to offer alternative jobs to workers concerned about exposure, and several industry executives said that many of the production processes have since changed, offering workers more protection from chemicals.

"This is a confirmation of what has been known for some time," said Amanda Hawes, director of the Santa Clara Center for Occupational Safety and Health, a community research organization in Silicon Valley. "They're acknowledging something that people have had very serious concerns about and have been trying to do something about."

Ted Smith of the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition, an environmental advocacy group, said, "We've been trying to warn industry for more than 10 years. Their position is they wanted to stall until a body count came in. Well, here it is. A one-third rate is atrocious."

Smith said that his group only last week was celebrating a significant legislative victory when Congress voted to require Sematech, a joint government-industry research program, to devote \$10 million toward research in environmentally safe manufacturing technology. The measure passed despite strong industry opposition.

Jim Ruderman, a spokesman for IBM, said the company did not believe there was reason for alarm in the John Hopkins study, which the company commissioned in 1987. He said there were several weaknesses in the report and that further studies have been commissioned.

"We want to be careful," he said. "We're not trying to be alarmists. There hasn't been a mass panic nor should there be."

Preliminary Data

IBM issued the warnings last month after it received prelimi-

nary data from the study, which is not scheduled to be completed until next year. Because of the nature of the findings, the company also reported them to the Environmental Protection Agency. Although it made no public announcement, IBM acknowledged its actions during the weekend.

The study tracked female IBM workers in Burlington, Vt., and East Fishkill, N.Y., from 1980 to 1989. It found that the miscarriage rate for those workers who did not come in contact with either of the chip-making chemicals was significantly lower than for women who did.

The study showed 62 miscarriages out of 398 pregnancies, or 15.6 percent, among women who did not handle the chemicals, in contrast to the 33.3 percent rate for the women who did.

Information Shared

IBM gave information from the study to companies that are mem-

bers of the Semiconductor Industry Association.

Intel, Texas Instruments, AT&T, Advanced Micro Devices, Signetics and National Semiconductor have all recently notified their workers of a potential health risk from exposure to the chemicals, said Thomas Beermann, an association spokesman.

"The findings are of great interest, but because of their preliminary nature and the need to know more, there aren't a lot of alarm bells going off in the industry," he said.

Dr. Robert Harrison, a UCSF professor of occupational medicine, yesterday noted that the IBM study was prompted by results of a smaller survey suggesting a link between miscarriages and the chemicals. He said the new results were "certainly a cause for concern," but cautioned that he had not yet seen the report in detail.