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Attorney Jacques Dulin is the new president of the Peninsula Intellectual Property Law Association. [C-2]



Chip firms hit for miscarriage risk

Critics say 'wait and see' attitude endangers workers

By Kathleen Sullivan
 OF THE EXAMINER STAFF

Advocates for computer chip workers are fed up with the industry's "wait and see" attitude toward reducing workplace toxics, saying the dangers of some substances are well known and should be eliminated.

Amanda Hawes, director of the Santa Clara Center for Occupational Safety and Health, a 20-year-old watchdog group, said the industry should pay as much attention to the health of its workers as it does the safety of its chips, which

are produced in specially designed rooms to prevent microscopic particles of dust from damaging them.

"If a company had reported that a certain chemical would damage a computer chip, the industry would move real fast to correct the problem," Hawes said.

Hawes made the comments Monday following reports that preliminary results of a study of workers at International Business Machines Corp. showed that women exposed to two solvents known as glycol ethers had a 33.3 percent miscarriage rate, compared with a 15.6 percent rate among nonproduction staff.

An IBM spokesman said the company has decreased the use of the chemicals and tightened up permissible exposure levels to a

point "far more rigorous" than federal standards, but has no plans to discontinue entirely the use of the chemicals.

Although chip makers are continuing to use the solvents, some firms are offering to transfer pregnant women to other jobs. Intel, Texas Instruments, AT&T, Advanced Micro Devices, Signetics and National Semiconductor have issued warnings about the chemicals in recent weeks.

Howard High, a spokesman at Intel Corp., said the Santa Clara company uses one of the two chemicals linked to miscarriages in the IBM study, but noted that Intel can't draw a direct comparison with IBM's plants until the final

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Effects of solvent exposure feared

study is released in 1993. He said Intel's air monitoring shows that employees are exposed to 1/50th to 1/100th of the permissible glycol ether levels allowed by the federal government. "We don't know if that compares favorably or not with IBM's exposure levels," High said.

IBM commissioned the study by Johns Hopkins University in 1987, after a study by Digital Equipment Corp. found elevated miscarriage rates among female workers in its chip production plants, but did not identify the source of the problem. The Semiconductor Industry Association launched a three-year health study in 1989, but the results have not yet been released.

Hawes said she is disappointed that the computer chip industry wants to "sit and watch and wait" until it gets more data on the reproductive hazards of glycol ethers before taking action. She noted that the California Department of Health Services issued health warnings on the substance 10 years



EXAMINER FILE PHOTO

James Robinson says "right to know" laws aren't enforced.

ago. In 1986, the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration reported that workplace exposures to glycol ethers posted a significant health risk.

The Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition, a grass-roots environmental group in San Jose, asked chip makers Monday to replace glycol ethers by year's end with safe alternatives.

Worker advocates say job transfers are only a partial solution to the problem. Many women will risk exposure during the first few weeks

before they know they're pregnant. Male workers may also be at risk; some studies show that glycol ethers also harm male reproductive systems.

James Robinson, a UC-Berkeley professor and author of "Toil and Toxics: Workplace Struggles and Political Strategies for Occupational Health," said California "right to know" laws require employers to provide detailed information on hazardous substances. However, the state relies largely on "good faith" efforts by employers to comply, because it lacks the resources to strictly enforce the laws. Since Silicon Valley's work force is not unionized, there are no labor unions pressing for change — as the Oil Chemical and Atomic Workers Union did in 1977 when some of its workers became sterile after mixing agricultural pesticides.

Robinson said another way to reduce hazards to workers is to tax businesses that use toxic chemicals to encourage them to explore alternatives. If the substance is critical to the manufacturing process, employers will pay the tax; if it isn't a key component, they will find alternatives to avoid paying the penalty.