

Questions & Answers from the View-Master Public Meeting Held on January 28, 2003



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This document contains responses to questions that were gathered at the public meeting that Oregon DHS held with former View-Master workers and concerned citizens on January 28, 2003, at the Elmonica School in Beaverton.

To develop answers, these questions were referred to several different agencies, including the Office of Environmental and Occupational Epidemiology of Oregon DHS, the Office of Environmental Services and Consultation of Oregon DHS, Oregon Department of Environmental Quality, Oregon Drinking Water Program, the federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, the Ombudsman's Office for Injured Workers in the Department of Consumer and Business Services, as well as the Mattel Corporation.

The responses were developed to the best of our knowledge at the present time. This document may be updated in the future if we receive new information.

Section V. The Occupational & Industrial Use of TCE

Q: What is TCE, why was it used, is it a man-made chemical?

TCE is a man-made chemical and does not occur naturally. Its presence indicates manufacture, use, or storage. Estimated use patterns suggest that 80% of TCE is used for vapor degreasing of fabricated metal parts in the automotive and metal industries. Consumer products that contain TCE include typewriter correction fluids, paint removers and strippers, adhesives, spot removers, and cleaning fluids for rugs. Before its ban for certain applications in 1977, TCE was also used as a general (mostly obstetric) anesthetic, grain fumigant, disinfectant, pet food additive, and extractant of spices in foods and caffeine in coffee.

Q: Is TCE used any longer?

TCE was used at the View-Master factory until 1980, when degreasing operations ceased. TCE was no longer used at the View-Master plant after 1980, but TCE continues to be widely used in other industries.

Q: What about the handling of TCE and other chemicals without protection?

Those former workers who happened to handle TCE or other chemicals without personal protective equipment, such as gloves, face masks, or respirators, would be at risk for having additional contact with these chemicals, either on the skin, breathing them, or getting them in their eyes. These certainly are exposures of concern. In the health evaluation, we will be asking about these kind of exposures, so that we can know which workers had these types of exposures, and for what period of time. The potential health effects would vary, depending on the different routes of exposure, and the amount of exposure without protective equipment. If there were ventilation systems in place or other engineering controls, they could help to reduce or mitigate these exposures.

Q: How is the information collected by the DHS going to be used to effect TCE use?

The primary purpose of the information that will be collected by DHS is to help former workers understand what were the risk factors that resulted from their exposure, and to help them know what they need to communicate to their health care providers. Because of the unusual nature of the exposures at the View-Master plant, the findings of the proposed health evaluation will help assist industrial facilities or hazardous waste sites where TCE contamination has either been threatened or documented, to direct people in their evaluations of people who have been exposed. Furthermore, this information could and should be used to help protect workers elsewhere in businesses that still use TCE from exposure during the use and handling of TCE, and to help ensure that TCE is properly disposed of, in order to protect people and the environment from contamination.

Q: Was TCE the only degreaser used? If not, what others were used?

As far as the DHS has been able to determine in reviewing records and speaking with former workers and employers, TCE was the primary degreaser that was used. We're not aware of other large amounts of degreaser or solvent used in the quantities that TCE was used, and TCE was the primary contaminant found in the supply well. We hope to learn more information than we currently know by interviewing former workers.

Q: Is there a way to insure that other companies won't be doing similar contamination elsewhere?

We can't guarantee that companies elsewhere won't cause similar contamination elsewhere. The EPA has passed laws that require that these chemicals be handled and disposed of in ways that are different from the ways they were handled and used at the View-Master facility during the 1950s, 60s, and 1970s. Companies are no longer allowed to dispose of these chemicals in the unrestricted manner as they were in the past. For example, it was legal to dispose of the chemical by dumping it on the ground. Now, by law, TCE must be recycled or disposed of as a hazardous waste in a specified hazardous waste facility.

Q: Who are the other companies with TCE contamination?

We do not know what other companies in Oregon are currently using TCE. Companies are not required to register the use of TCE. We do know, however, that there are major sites throughout the United States where TCE contamination has been detected from past use and disposal. Sites that were included in the National Exposure Subregistry for TCE include, among others, the McGraw Edison Corporation in Michigan, Gemeinhardt Company in Indiana, Beloit Corporation, Warner Electric Brake and Clutch Company in Illinois, and Hughes Aircraft Company in Arizona.

Q: Is there any more or less danger handling metal parts going in and out of the degreaser?

It is unknown how the risks from breathing vapors or from direct skin contact with pure TCE compare with risks from drinking TCE that is diluted in water. It is possible that a person who handled TCE without protective equipment, and who also drank contaminated water may have greater health risks because of the compounded exposures. We hope to determine whether occupational exposure confers different health risks than exposure to TCE in drinking water by conducting a complete health investigation and interviewing former workers about the jobs they held, what years they worked, how much water they drank, and what health problems they have experienced.