

Should a company test workers for chemical-related work illness?

Workplace injuries and illnesses do not always develop from a single event. Some of the most serious injuries and illnesses develop slowly and may not be noticed initially. How far should a company go to prevent and detect these hidden work-related dangers? That's a question raised by a lawsuit filed recently in the Philadelphia County Court of Common Pleas.

According to news reports, the union is suing a company that supplies solvents and other materials to a floor manufacturing plant in Pennsylvania. It says the solvents contain Trichloroethylene (TCE) and other chemicals that could lead to devastating work-related illnesses.

The union alleges that the chemical company supplied TCE and another solvent that included TCE to the chemical company. The chemicals were used in coatings and to degrease machinery. The complaint says that workers were regularly exposed to the chemicals.

The wife of one former worker who died of a degenerative neurological disease sued several companies, including the company in this lawsuit, alleging that her husband's disease was caused by exposure to TCE.

As a result of the exposures, the union says the chemical company should test the materials for TCE and other chemicals. It also asks the chemical company to create a program that would monitor workers for early signs of illness. PET scans, MRIs and other testing would be done to detect the diseases earlier.

The union's attorney says that diagnosing chemical exposure-

related illnesses earlier can lead to better treatments and outcomes. Routine exams are not designed to uncover symptoms of TCE. The attorney also says that other Pennsylvania companies have created screening programs when workers have a history of toxic exposure. The union already contacted a Philadelphia hospital about setting up the program.

The manufacturing company is not included in the lawsuit. It's unclear whether any workers have filed workers' compensation claims for TCE-related illnesses. These claims could be challenging, particularly for workers who were exposed over many years.

Source: Lancaster Online, "Union workers want testing for toxic chemical exposure," □ Gil Smart, April 23, 2014