

Too high a price

Mark Niemann, a contract electrician and instrumentation specialist, nearly died of acute myelogenous leukemia (AML) in November 1993. He believes he got the rare cancer from prolonged exposure to benzene, a sweet-smelling solvent ubiquitous in the petrochemical industry. A benzene-AML link has been well established by scientists.

Niemann worked in seven Houston-area refineries and chemical plants, as well as on several construction jobs, from 1976 to 1993. Where he might have been exposed to benzene in amounts large enough to cause cancer is anyone's guess: He recalls smelling all sorts of foul odors and being doused with all sorts of strange liquids.

At one chemical plant, Niemann said, he and other contract workers would get "quench oil" -- a petroleum distillate used in the manufacturing process -- on their hands, backs, legs and arms while disassembling transmitters. "It was pretty much all over us," he said, and they had no protective clothing.

Niemann later learned that quench oil contains benzene. "If I'd have known, I would have taken different measures," he said. He said he was told only that he shouldn't get too much oil on him because it "stunk" and could ruin a pair of shoes.

His wife, Michaele, would wash his oil-stained clothes. "It was a very bad smell," she said, "plus it made the clothes black."

At the same plant, Niemann also spent a lot of time around an API (American Petroleum Institute) separator, a concrete pool in which hydrocarbons are skimmed from wastewater. Most of the time he was not required to wear a respirator, he said.

At other plants, Niemann said, he encountered open streams of gasoline -- which contains benzene -- as well as unidentified liquids and vapors.

Plant officials would "tell you there was a problem if you got this chemical or that chemical on you," he said. "You had to take all your clothes off and go under a shower. You really didn't know what it was. You'd get sprinkled with this or that or the

other. You never really thought about it."

Many times Niemann was not given respirators or gloves, he said. He's convinced that plant workers are better informed about chemical hazards than contract workers.

"The contractor doesn't have a chance," Niemann said.

Niemann's AML was discovered after he was hospitalized for chest and back pains. During a three-day period in late November, his platelet count -- which affects the blood's clotting ability -- dropped from an already-low 52,000 to a near-fatal 11,000. His weight fell from about 140 to 111. He underwent chemotherapy last winter and his cancer is in remission. But he worries about the future.

"It's terrifying to think that you can do good for a while and then (the AML) might come back," Niemann said. "There's no rules that say I'm cured. They say it takes five years to prove you're over it."

Niemann used to bowl, fish and work with wood. The AML put an end to all of that, although lately he has been doing some work, his wife said.

"He can't work more than a couple of hours at a time," she said. "Then he spends the rest of the time in depression."