ROLE OF THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR OCCUPATIONAL SAFETY AND HEALTH

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This Symposium has been extremely helpful and informative to those of us who represent the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH). We have already accumulated enough new information to provide input into the Institute's priority list.

At the moment, the Institute has under consideration a priority list of some 20 subjects. It is oriented primarily toward chemical environmental agents and certain physical agents — for example, arsenic, benzene, beryllium, cadmium and its compounds, carbon monoxide, chromic-acid mist, cotton dust, fibrous glass, heat stress, lead, mercury, noise, pesticides, silica, trichloroethylene, and ultraviolet radiation — for which criteria documents are being developed. Also being documented are dose response; recommendations for medical criteria, analytical procedures, and sampling procedures; and recommendations for labeling and various other protective measures. [Subsequent to this meeting NIOSH established barotrauma as a toxic physical agent and published a call for information relative to barotrauma, including decompression tables and standards for divers and tunnel workers — Eds.]

Under the Occupational Safety and Health Act regulations, criteria documents are submitted by the Institute through an ad hoc advisory committee to the Secretary of Labor. The Department of Labor promulgates the standards, either accepting or rejecting the Institute's recommendations. Since the Institute is the research organization under the Act, providing expertise in occupational medicine and industrial hygiene, its recommendations are in most instances accepted.

Many of this Symposium's participants no doubt already have in mind certain research that the Institute might instigate — *e.g.*, an epidemiological study of dysbarism in the diver versus the tunnel worker. NIOSH's research grants, as well as its in-house and contract research, encompass epidemiology, applied and basic animal studies, and some human experimental studies in ergonomics and behavior.

The matter of a registry immediately poses special difficulties. NIOSH is involved with so many occupational diseases that focusing on one might generate pressure from various quarters to set up registers for other medical or environmental problems as well. We are nevertheless interested in exploring the possibilities of at least some sort of prototype registry based, for example, on the beryllium registry at MIT.

It is doubtful that NIOSH could ever assume the task of studying all U.S. commercial, Navy, and sports divers. But obviously one must begin somewhere. The British have set the example with respect to diving. Quite often in the past we have followed British leadership in setting standards — for instance, in our recommendations regarding asbestos studies.

The question of a possible need for new decompression tables has been intimated in the course of this Symposium. Pressure could indeed be exerted in the near future to develop decompression-table standards under the Occupational Safety and Health Act. The Department of Labor (DOL), for example, could place a priority on the establishment of decompression standards. With respect to many hazardous chemical and physical agents, the DOL has in the past adopted existing consensus standards from various sources and made them into law. Therefore, I would recommend consideration of how the expertise of this group might be directed toward the development of better tables, so that someday those who dive will not be forced to live with standards that are actually not the best possible. Such a deficiency exists in many present industrial hygiene standards; consequently, NIOSH is having to conduct research to develop more appropriate criteria for standards. One reason for the Institute's priority system is to identify deficiencies in specific areas.

NIOSH tries to work harmoniously with the

Department of Labor under the Occupational Safety and Health Act, because the DOL has ultimate responsibility for promulgating industrial standards and enforcing them. This responsibility is rather different from that established by the Coal Mine Health and Safety Act, under which NIOSH develops and sets the health standards.

The Department of Labor was unable to send a representative to this Symposium. But I am told that it will be guided by our report of the proceedings.