Business Week Misses the Mark on Beryllium Health and Safety

CLEVELAND - April 25, 2005 - The following is a statement issued by Brush Wellman Inc. in response to coverage on the beryllium industry by Business Week magazine:

"Starting with the headline of its May 2 article, "Beryllium Exposure: The 'Unrecognized Epidemic'", Business Week missed the opportunity to report fairly and completely on the complicated topic of beryllium and occupational health. The article unfairly depicts the beryllium industry as ill equipped or unsuccessful in preventing the well-known potential health effects of occupational exposure to airborne beryllium.

Portraying a small number of positive blood test results of OSHA compliance inspectors as a sweeping, unseen workplace health problem, Business Week runs afoul of the facts. If Business Week is so convinced that beryllium is a broader occupational health issue, why didn't it take its own stand in the headline rather than hedge it with the inflammatory quoted words of a familiar beryllium detractor?

Peel back this so-called "epidemic," and you'll find just the opposite: a small number of OSHA inspectors have had positive results using a blood test that is widely criticized for its problems of variability and reliability by leading health and safety experts including the American Conference of Government Industrial Hygienists, and the U.S. Navy, Army and Air Force. Labeling of these results as a crisis by Business Week sources is fear-mongering sensationalism. In fact, Brush Wellman contends that these testing numbers are not surprising. Nor do they indicate any health effect. This test does not predict whether someone exposed to beryllium will get sick. It merely says a person's body has "seen" beryllium before, which could even occur from nature since beryllium is found in soil throughout the United States.

Studies even find positive test results in about 2% of the non-exposed general population. It is not known why persons not occupationally exposed to beryllium can test positive, but exposure to naturally occurring or environmentally generated sources of beryllium, as well as cigarette smoke, have been suggested.

Substantial disagreement in beryllium blood test results has been found when test data are compared within and between laboratories. Additionally, some individuals who test consistently positive at one point in time may test consistently negative at a later point in time. The ill-advised use of this test can result in the same discriminatory employment practices that have resulted from genetic screening of workers.

The Business Week article is also remarkable for what it doesn't cover with respect to OSHA and the beryllium blood test. It could have explored why, in launching a pilot testing program, OSHA singled out beryllium over the vast field of other potentially hazardous materials that the agency's inspectors are commonly exposed to. It could have also dug into why OSHA hasn't researched past exposure histories of the inspectors it has recently tested. Or, it could have pursued the financial interest that test advocates such as National Jewish Medical Center have in promoting the test's use at $210 to $600 per test. Finally, for a publication that covers business and government's impact on the private sector, it would have been timely for Business Week to look into the prejudicial effect this medical monitoring of OSHA inspectors might have on the beryllium rulemaking process now pending.

Beryllium is a critical component in life-saving products such as airbag sensors, fire extinguishing system sprinkler heads, x-ray windows for mammography, medical lasers, landing gear bearings, and severe weather forecasting satellites. Beryllium-containing products are often the material of choice when a product must work every time and when failure is not an option. Other examples include radiation shielding on cell phones, pressure sensors on fire fighter air packs, and enemy-detecting radar targeting systems on fighter aircraft. It's beryllium that allows our military to "own the night" in aerial combat. The beryllium-free Eden that our harshest critics promote would be a world vastly different than the one we live in and enjoy today.

Companies large and small have proven they can work with beryllium safely. Brush Wellman has built a well-established and credible reputation for providing beryllium health and safety information to our workers and our customers.

Detailed information on worker protection and potential beryllium related health effects can be found by looking at our web site at www.brushwellman.com."