Chicago Tribune Reporter Maligns Beryllium Industry

CLEVELAND – July 30, 2001 – The following is a statement issued by Brush Wellman Inc. in response to coverage on the beryllium industry by the Chicago Tribune:

“The story that appeared in the July 29, 2001 Chicago Tribune by Sam Roe entitled “Deadly metal’s use endangers workers,” does yet another grave disservice to those who work for the beryllium industry and those who benefit from its products. As he did when employed by the Toledo Blade, Mr. Roe has once again ignored facts that don’t support his position and has distorted information in order to sensationalize a story. In short, this latest attack by Mr. Roe is nothing more than a poor attempt to recycle old news into a new headline.

When Mr. Roe first explored this issue at the Toledo Blade, Brush Wellman granted him over 50 hours of fact-finding interviews with key staff members. Recently, in response to the 51 written, multi-part questions submitted on behalf of the Chicago Tribune, we provided extensive documentation which included numerous scientific publications in an effort to ensure accuracy, balance and fairness. Yet, he still persists in blurring the most basic concepts. For instance, he makes no distinction between the different forms of beryllium disease and confuses it with sensitivity to beryllium. As a result, the potential for “beryllium disease” reported in his story is significantly overstated.

He persists in mischaracterizing beryllium-related conditions as “often fatal” despite being presented with published statements attributed to Dr. Lee Newman, a medical source in this and earlier Blade stories, that chronic beryllium disease (CBD) is not often fatal or is no longer fatal.

Mr. Roe continues to exhibit a basic lack of understanding of the diagnostic tools used to track CBD and sensitivity. As a reporter, he urges more extensive use of the blood lymphocyte proliferation test (BLPT), even though experts on this subject suggest that broader industry application is not appropriate because of the test’s limitations. These include lack of standardization among labs, inconsistent results within and between labs, a significant number of false positive readings, and reversals from positive to negative test results.

He implies that workplace practices are inadequate to protect worker health, yet virtually every example he chose to describe involves an organization or an individual failing to follow recommended procedures and practices. Moreover, he ignores the many companies nationwide that follow good practices to protect their workers.

Mr. Roe elects to omit expert opinion that does not support his own biased conclusions. In our efforts to cooperate with him on this article, we provided a number of sources and citations that might help put this matter in perspective. Most of those suggestions were ignored.

Even worse, in an embarrassing attempt to steal the spotlight, Mr. Roe tries to take credit for the new federal program now in place to compensate workers with CBD who had been involved in serving the nuclear weapons industry. Thanks to the hard work of several members of Congress, that legislation was underway before the Toledo Blade (Mr. Roe) began reporting on this matter.

Finally, he distorts and trivializes the market for beryllium products. He chooses to ignore the fact that today, beryllium-containing products play an essential role in many applications that are vital to society – everything from highly reliable fire sprinklers to mammography equipment used to detect breast cancer. Our customers serve these markets by providing components that outperform competitive products and materials.

Brush Wellman remains committed to eradicating CBD from the workplace. We are working tirelessly toward that end, and regret that Mr. Roe has chosen to exploit this issue once again for questionable purposes.

Rest assured that we intend to make our position clear on these matters to the Chicago Tribune and to all others who have an interest in this subject.”