By Stephen Mihm | August 26, 2007

Some of the worst of regulatory lapses in China involve diethylene glycol, a deadly poison that has shown up in everything from toothpaste to cough syrup. More than 100 people, mostly children, died in Panama after ingesting cough syrup laced with the poison, which product counterfeiters in China had used as a cheap substitute for the sweetener glycerin.

The case has attracted outrage, and deservedly so. But what hasn’t gotten a lot of mention is that America had almost the exact same experience some 70 years ago.

In 1937, drug companies operated with considerable latitude when mixing and selling new medications. In the spring of that year, the chief chemist of Tennessee-based S.E. Massengill Company hit on a way to deliver sulfa drugs used to treat strep throat and other infections in a liquid form by dissolving them in diethylene glycol. No one tested the drug for safety, and in the fall of that year shipments of "Elixir Sulfanilamide" went out across the

Within a month, it's estimated that more than 100 people, mostly children, had died horrific deaths as their kidneys shut down and they went into convulsions. The owner of the company, when pressed to admit some measure of culpability, famously answered, "We have been supplying a legitimate professional demand and not once could have foreseen the unlooked-for results. I do not feel that there was any responsibility on our part."

That was just plain wrong: the toxicity of diethylene glycol was already established. And even if it hadn't been, simple animal testing would have revealed that the syrup was poisonous. But this was a different era, where the failure to conduct the necessary tests -- like the failure of Chinese manufacturers to test their raw materials -- had tragic results.

Then, as now, not everyone responsible shrugged their shoulders and moved on. Massengill's chief chemist, Harold Watkins, committed suicide while awaiting trial; earlier this month, Zhang Shuhong, owner of a Chinese toy factory accused of using banned lead paint, did the same.

And the episode led to the passage of the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act the next year, ushering in a new era of drug safety.

-- STEPHEN MIHM

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