

The chemical worker and the research laboratory

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The chemical industry created two new figures in the Basel workforce: the chemical worker and the research chemist. The chemical workers, employed in the production plants, handled toxic and dangerous substances, worked in shifts and were exposed to accidents and occupational diseases. Bladder cancer among workers who handled aromatic amines used in dye production was one of the first recognised occupational cancers, observed in Basel and other dye centres from the end of the nineteenth century.¹ The protection of workers' health became a matter of factory legislation, collective agreements and, eventually, the Swiss accident insurance, established by law in 1911 and operational from 1918.

The research chemists, trained at universities and technical schools in Switzerland, Germany and elsewhere, worked in laboratories that the companies built and expanded. The Basel companies cooperated with the University of Basel, the Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich and other institutions, financed chairs and research projects and recruited their best graduates. Several scientists who worked for or with the Basel companies received Nobel Prizes, among them Paul Hermann Müller of Geigy in 1948 and Tadeus Reichstein of the University of Basel in 1950.

The combination of industrial production and scientific research made the Basel chemical industry a knowledge industry, in which the most valuable assets were the skills of its scientists and the results of their research. This character would become even more pronounced in the pharmaceutical industry of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, in which research and development absorb a large share of revenues and patents protect the results.

1 Notes

1. On the occurrence of bladder cancer among workers in the dye industry (aromatic amines) and its recognition as an occupational disease, including observations in Basel, see the literature on the history of occupational medicine. To be verified. ↩

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