



Hidajat, M., McElvenny, D. M., Ritchie, P., Darnton, A., Mueller, W., Van Tongeren, M., ... De Vocht, F. (2019). Healthy worker effects explain differences in internal and external comparisons in a rubber industry cohort study. *Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, 76(10), 781. [oemed-2019-106083]. <https://doi.org/10.1136/oemed-2019-106083>

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Healthy-worker effects explain differences internal and external comparisons in a rubber industry cohort study.

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In his letter, Professor Sorahan ¹ poses an important question about our paper ², namely whether the results indicate that occupational exposures to agents such as rubber dust, rubber fumes, and nitrosamines in the rubber industry are associated with increased risk of mortality from cancers of the bladder, lung, stomach, oesophagus, prostate, larynx, brain, pancreas, liver, and lymphatic and haematopoietic tissue. Sorahan argues that causation does not seem to be warranted since results from a second study using the same study cohort indicate no increased mortality risks from these cancers when compared to the general population ³. However, internal analyses, which make selection effects, such as the healthy worker effect ⁴, much less likely are a more appropriate method to assess causality than analyses that compare risk in an industrial cohort with the general population. Many occupational populations differ in their mortality rates from the general population, even after standardization, because of selection

effects on health status at hire and subsequent healthy worker survivor effects that have both been well described in the literature. These effects differ between industries and specific exposures ⁵, but often result in SMRs under-estimating the true effects on mortality from occupational exposures in industrial cohorts wherever a causal association exists ⁶, as well as in cohort studies more generally ⁷. Therefore, it is perfectly possible, as indeed these data also show, and not necessarily conflicting that an association between a specific exposure and risk of premature mortality exists within an occupational cohort while it is not identified in comparison with the general population ⁶.

It is important to acknowledge that Professor Sorahan's main concern relates to inferences made with respect to the contemporary rubber industry, whereas our study relates to historic exposures. In this respect we would like to draw attention to the last sentence in our paper, which indicates that there are "...implications for the industry today where occupational exposures to N-nitrosamines continues to persist, although at greatly reduced levels compared with several decades ago."

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