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# Poison gas in plane crashes *Back*

The Federal Aviation Administration is charged with the responsibility of certifying the safety of commercial and private aircraft. But by its own admission, the FAA does not have any standards governing the use of certain plastic materials in aircraft cabins which, in contact with fire, give off deadly hydrogen cyanide gas.

Dr. George Christopolous, chief toxicologist in the Cook County coroner's office, discovered evidence of cyanide poisoning in the blood of 10 of 55 victims of last month's plane crashes at Midway and O'Hare airports. Altho lethal quantities of the poison were

1/28/73

found, the victims died of a combination of poisoning and smoke inhalation.

The lethal material is a foam insulation expanded with "iso-cyanate," which burns and gives off the deadly gas. Its poisonous quality has been known to the FAA since 1956, when cyanide was discovered in the blood of a pilot who died in a plane crash at Salt Lake City. It subsequently has found evidence of cyanide poisoning in pilots involved in other crashes.

In a letter last month to McDonnell-Douglas Corp. of St. Louis, the Illinois Department of Law Enforcement asked why the deadly plastic insulation continues to be used. [McDonnell-Douglas made the two planes involved, but other manufacturers also use this insulation material.] It is a question that deserves to be answered.

Fire has always been one of the most dangerous hazards in aviation. To use a material that compounds the hazard of fire by emitting a deadly gas is unconscionable, particularly when the new generation of jumbo jet aircraft have increased passenger capacity.

While airlines and aircraft manufacturers can point with pride at the enviable safety record of commercial aviation, it behooves them to develop a new material to replace the foam insulation and remove one more hazard to safe flight. Regardless of the cost, the airlines and manufacturers owe that much to their passengers and flight crews.