Washington Post

Cyanide Gas Found in Victims

JAN 19 1973

Poison From Plane Fire Cited

1/19/73

By Joel Weisman
Special to The Washington Post

CHICAGO, Jan. 18 — Cyanide poisoning in sufficient quantities to cause death was found in the blood stream of some of the victims of a Dec. 8 United Airlines plane crash here near Midway Airport, Cook County cornorer Dr. Andew J. Toman has disclosed.

Forty-five persons died in the crash of the flight, bound from Washington.

Toman said the cyanide fumes were inhaled by victims along with smoke from a fire in the crash. He attributed the poisonous fumes from the burning of foam rubber in seats and plastic coating used on curtains and seats.

The coroner disclosed his findings in a report on the Dec. 8 crash and another fatal crash here Dec. 20 — in which 10 persons died when two planes collided on a runway at O'Hare Airport. Of the total 55 victims in the twin fatalities, Toman said, 10 had inhaled cyanide fumes in sufficient quantities to cause death. Seven of the 10 were aboard the United flight.

It is possible, he added, that if those poisoned had been evacuated immediately, their lives might have been saved.

Dr. George Christopolous, chief toxicologist in the corner's office, said when he discovered evidence of poisoning he immediately requested an explanation from the FAA.

According to Dr. Christopolous, the FAA said that it had previous evidence of cyanide poisoning in pilots in other crashes.

He added that cyanide acts rapidly when combined with smoke and can accelerate death.

In 1967, Richard L. Ottinger, a Democratic congressman from New York, asked the FAA to require airlines to replace plastics in airline interiors as soon as possible.

The FAA replied, however, that to the best of its knowledge "not a single aircraft accident death had been directly attributable to gases such as cyanide compounds, nitric phosgene oxide, hydrogen fluoride, or other gasses," produced when plastic is burned.