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CONFEREES STUDY ASBESTOS HAZARD

125 From 13 Countries Find That Lethal Mineral Is Present Everywhere

By JANE E. BRODY
Special to The New York Times

DURHAM, N.C.—More than 125 scientists from 13 countries gathered here in the midst of the tobacco country last week to grapple with an urgent public health question: What risk does the general public face from the ingestion of asbestos, a mineral of a thousand uses whose potentially lethal fibers pervade the human environment?

In three days of intense discussion and debate, no final conclusions were reached, a few worrisome preliminary findings were presented and hundreds of as-yet unanswered questions were raised.

Only two facts went unchallenged: that asbestos is everywhere—in the air, in waterways, in drinking water, in foods and beverages, drugs and talcum powder; and that when inhaled in large quantities, asbestos is dangerous, causing incapacitating lung disease and highly lethal cancers.

The conference, called by the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, was prompted largely by the discovery earlier this year that the drinking water of Duluth, Minn., and other cities on Lake Superior was heavily contaminated with asbestos, the presumed result of pollution by a mining company that has been dumping 67,000 tons of rocky waste into the lake each day for 17 years.

The Government is seeking to end the dumping of these asbestos containing wastes into Lake Superior in an action currently being heard in United States District Court in Minneapolis. But what can and what should it do about the countless other sources of asbestos contamination?

"Asbestos represents a classic problem that our modern industrial society will face over and over again," remarked Dr. David Rall, director of the National Institute. "It's a vital substance, so we can't ban it, but there's a growing concern about its possible health effects."

And since the health effects of asbestos often do not show up until 20 to 30 years after initial exposure, "even if we stop all asbestos exposure today, we will continue to see evidence of disease well into the next century," said Dr. Robert Burrell, a microbiologist at West Virginia University.

Virtually all the reliable information about the harm asbestos can wreak on the human body is derived from the experience of asbestos workers who have inhaled large quantities of the fibers.

In addition to succumbing to the chronic lung disease asbestosis, these workers are far more likely than the general population to die from lung cancer and mesothelioma, an incurable cancer that affects the lining of the chest or abdomen.

Recently Dr. Irving J. Selikoff, who directs a Federally sponsored asbestos research center at Mount Sinai Medical Center, reported that asbestos workers also had an increased risk of developing cancer of the gastrointestinal tract.

An estimated 100,000 new cases of gastrointestinal cancer will be diagnosed in the United States next year, and although it is the nation's most common type of internal cancer, its cause remains unknown.

A big question explored at last week's meeting was how inhaled asbestos might damage the digestive tract. Dr. Sidney Laskin of New York University noted that 25 to 50 per cent of inhaled particles were likely to be coughed up and then swallowed.

Intensive studies of the effects of asbestos consumption on a variety of experimental animals are just getting under way. But preliminary findings presented to the meeting indicate that the fibrous mineral can pass through the wall of the small intestine, get into the bloodstream and lymph system and become widely distributed throughout the body organs, including the brain.

Dr. Selikoff said that an unexpectedly large number of asbestos workers he has been studying had died of brain tumors, although the significance of this observation was not yet clear.

A pilot study conducted in Canada resulted in kidney and chest-wall tumors in three of nine rats fed asbestos mixed with corn oil, although none of the animals given corn oil alone developed cancer.

Dr. Gerhard Volkheimer of Berlin reported that particles similar to asbestos fibers were "pesorbed" between cells of the gastrointestinal tract much more rapidly after the consumption of caffeine or nicotine. He said that pesorbed particles could be found in breast milk and could cross the placenta to the fetus.

Dr. John Goldsmith of the National Cancer Institute urged that "all unnecessary sources of asbestos be eliminated." Toward this end, the Center for Science in the Public Interest and the Environmental Defense Fund have requested a ban on asbestos filters, used to process many beverages and drugs, and elimination of asbestos from talc, used in foods as well as in cosmetic powder.