

FILE NAME: Newspaper & Magazine Articles (NMA)

DATE: 1970 July 12

DOC#: NMA168

DOCUMENT DESCRIPTION: London Sunday Times - Blue Asbestos Clue
to Five Deaths

Sunday, July 12, 1970

Blue asbestos clue to five deaths

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Medical Correspondent

FIVE WOMEN have died in Nottingham from a form of cancer linked with asbestos after they had handled the substance for a short time while sweeping the streets during the war.

All had been using street-sweeping machines ("blue machines") into respirators at a local factory under contract to the Ministry of Supply. All died within two years of the appearance of symptoms from a highly malignant tumour of the connective tissue called pleural mesothelioma. The latent period between the end of exposure and the onset of symptoms was from 20 to 24 years.

The first patient in whom the tumour was diagnosed in 1946 had been a housewife all her life. She had been the assistant in her husband's business under suspicion of having been about his factory life, she recalled that one day when she was a girl

Three cases have been diagnosed at Nottingham City Hospital. He is one of a nationwide team of specialists attempting to assess what degree of exposure to asbestos is necessary to produce mesothelioma of the lungs and the peritoneum where it strikes less often.

He and his colleagues at other Nottingham hospitals have found asbestos in fatal cases of mesothelioma among male patients at the City and other Nottingham hospitals.

The men either had a history of exposure to asbestos or were found to have substantial amounts of asbestos in the lungs post-mortem. The maximum latent period from exposure to onset was 22 years and the minimum was seven years. Most of the patients had been working for small firms, manufacturing or collecting material in a domestic or industrial setting. It is a minor role that it might not be remembered as a danger.

Mesothelioma is a comparatively newly-recognized tumour that is now generally accepted as

being caused by asbestos dust, of which asbestosis seems to be most often the culprit. Although the evidence is increasingly solid, it should be added for the benefit of those personally concerned that by asbestos all of those who were at the time exposed to the dust during the war, in my view, its incidence is a multiple compared with that of the lung cancer caused by cigarette smoking.

Nevertheless, from 50 to 200 new cases a year are currently being notified to the Special Research Committee, which in February, 1969, the General Secretariat that increasing numbers of cases are being discovered.

A paragraph I first drew public attention to the risk in 1965, this year's growth was made a "prevalence" disease under the Industrial Injuries Act for people employed in certain occupations.

Asbestos is a form of silicate (silicates) of the form whose main symptom is shortness of breath. Moderate and advanced cases tend to deteriorate even after exposure from the source of the dust; about 50 per cent of lung cancer of the lung as distinct from mesothelioma—a fact of which they are aware.

Some workers find it hard to work and some would be surprised if they were told the men who die in their

mesothelioma to seven men with asbestosis.

Asbestosis, which was once the most common of the lung dust diseases known as the pneumoconiosis, now takes second place to mesothelioma with about 40 to 50 cases being diagnosed each year. It would, however, be a grave mistake to underestimate the significance of asbestosis and the plight of its victims.

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As against this, I spoke to one of the most reliable sources with a pension of only £2 7s a week supplemented by the maximum hardship allowance of £10. He will be receiving his pension with his one employer to considerably more than he previously thought acceptable.