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By JANE E. BRODY
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Cancer Found in Asbestos Workers' Kin

By JANE E. BRODY

The 933 men who produced asbestos insulation at a Paterson, N. J., plant in the nineteen-forties came home each day from the dusty factory covered with asbestos fibers.

Today, some 30 years later, many wives, children and other persons who were in contact with these men at home are beginning to show the effects of their peripheral and often brief exposure to this insidious mineral.

A study by Mount Sinai Medical Center has shown a high incidence of lung abnormalities among the workers' relatives, and four persons who were exposed as children have developed a rare, usually fatal form of cancer called mesothelioma, the only known cause of which is exposure to asbestos.

The new study, being conducted under a grant from the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, adds a new dimension to the already well-established dangers of asbestos, a ubiquitous mineral with some 3,000 uses. Thousands of workers have succumbed to asbestos-related cancers and lung disease, including many who worked at the Paterson factory.

Now, evidence is mounting that far less than the intense exposure of the work environment is necessary to produce asbestos-related disease. The new evidence raises questions not only about the adequacy of regulations designed to protect asbestos workers but also about the hazards the general public may face from exposure to the persistent fibers of asbestos.

Asbestos fibers can be found virtually everywhere — in air as a result of the erosion of brake linings, air conditioning systems, floor tiles and other sources; in commercial beverages that have been passed through asbestos filters; in water supplies that are carried through asbestos pipes.

The danger of asbestos to

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Cancer Found in Relatives of Asbestos Workers 30 Years After Contact

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those who work with it was described by Roman scientists as early as the first century, but it was not until British studies in the 1920's that any attempt was made to protect workers from its effects.

In the years since, workers exposed to asbestos have been shown to face a greatly increased risk of developing lung cancer, mesothelioma, cancers of the gastrointestinal tract and asbestosis, a scarring of the lungs. These effects generally do not show up until two or three — and sometimes even four — decades after the first exposure to asbestos.

A Two-Decade Study

For two decades, Dr. Irving J. Selikoff, director of Mount Sinai's Laboratory of Environmental Sciences, has been studying the effects of asbestos on the men who worked at the Union Asbestos and Rubber Company (UNARCO, as it is commonly called) in Paterson. The factory was in operation from 1941 to 1954.

These men came home each day covered with the whitish fibers of asbestos — on their clothes, in their hair, in their lunch pails. Sometimes they brought home samples of the fireproof product they made for their children to play with.

According to Dr. William Nicholson of the Mount Sinai team, asbestos fibers can still be found in the attic dust of the homes of workers who left the plant as many as 30 years ago.

A year ago, the Mount Sinai team began a study of the fate of those who lived with the Paterson workers. Thus far, of 210 family contacts examined under the direction of Dr. Henry A. Anderson, nearly 40 per cent were found on X-rays to have the kinds of abnormalities in their lungs common to asbestos workers. In some cases where X-ray abnormalities were found in the family, the worker had been at the UNARCO plant for only a few days.

In the last three months, three persons who were children at the time their relatives worked in the Paterson plant were found to have mesothelioma.

One of the three died of the disease in June at the age of 44. Her father had worked the late shift at the UNARCO plant for a year in the mid-1940's, and she took him a hot meal every evening, waiting outside the plant for her father to pick it up. Another patient was indirectly exposed to asbestos for just six months when she was four years old, and in the third case, the patient's father had worked at the plant for a year. This patient's sister, a nonsmoker, died of lung cancer at the age of 39.

A fourth person, the daughter of the man who developed the asbestos material made by UNARCO, died in 1965 of mesothelioma, the same disease that took her father's life 14 years earlier.

The new spate of mesothelioma cases is among several recent developments regarding asbestos that have caused alarm among the Mount Sinai investigators and stimulated labor leaders and others to challenge the adequacy of current protections against the time-bomb effects of this persistent mineral.

Dr. Selikoff fears an eventual "epidemic" of mesothelioma since, he says, "what we are seeing today reflects the size of the work force in the 1930's and 1940's when asbestos production was one-tenth what it is today." More than one million persons have at one time worked directly with asbestos.

Dr. Selikoff is also worried about the nearly three million Americans who worked in asbestos-ridden shipyards during World War II. Cases of mesothelioma have recently begun to appear among these people.

The other developments that are causing concern include a British medical report indicating that the levels of asbestos that Federal regulations say workers can safely inhale may in fact cause lung disease and cancer years later.

Another British study showed that rats can develop mesothelioma after as little as one day of inhaling asbestos fibers.

And a preliminary, unpublished Canadian study also in rats suggests that the consumption of small amounts of asbestos fibers can result in a wide spectrum of cancerous tumors, a finding that could be of significance to the residents of Minnesota who for the last 18 years have been drinking water from Lake Superior that is contaminated with asbestos from the wastes of a mining company.

A United States Court of Appeals has allowed the Lake Superior dumping to continue because the Government could not demonstrate that Minnesotans had suffered ill effects from drinking the asbestos-containing water or breathing the fiber-filled air.

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