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Talcum Study Clarified by N.Y. Hospital

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Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York has issued a statement "to correct certain confusions" about reports of research work conducted at the hospital's Department of Environmental Medicine on the asbestos content of some talcum powders.

The Washington Post reported the findings on March 8.

The statement made Wednesday by the center's president, Dr. Thomas C. Chalmers, said:

- The only baby powder tested that was reported to show asbestos represented less than one per cent of the market and the sample was five years old.
- The talcum powders used in the study "had been purchased more than three years ago."
- Recent analyses by the Food and Drug Administration "have not revealed appreciable amounts of asbestos" in talcum powder.

Chalmers also said, "The research work was of the highest technical quality and a significant contribution to the field."

Researchers in the Department of Environmental Medicine have taken exception to some parts of Chalmers' statement.

Arthur Rohl, research assistant in the department who worked on the talc study, said most of the powders had been purchased in 1973, but some were purchased as recently as 1975. Asbestos was found in some of the newer samples, he said, though "there was a decline in the amount."

Samples of 10 talcum powders were also purchased in a drug store in the last 10 days and are being studied now, Rohl said. 'Fewer contain asbestos and those that do have generally lesser amounts."

Dr. Irving J. Selikoff, chairman of the department and a leading authority on occupational diseases, said the apparent discrepancy between FDA's findings and Mount Sinai's is due to a difference in technique. FDA's methods are not sensitive enough to measure asbestos below a certain level, he said. FDA "uses Differential Thermal Analysis (DTA) and optical microscopy. These are not as sensitive as electron microscopy," the method used at Mt. Sinai, Dr. Selikoff said.

FDA's director of cosmetics technology, Heinz J. Eiermann, said the methodology the FDA used to examine 76 cosmetic tales in 1975 "has certain limitations. The level of sensitivity is greater with electron microscopy. DTA will not permit you to determine asbestos at less than half a per cent, posibly oen per cent, whereas you can determine it at lower concentrations by using electron microscopy."

Selikoff acknowledged that the cosmetics industry has "gone ahead quietly and improved the talc. But there is a huge chink in their armor. They were dusting people with asbestos all these years before, so what was put in the lungs before is still there.

"I certainly wouldn't want to be dusted with any asbestos. There is no safe level of asbestos known," Selikoff said.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration of the Department of Labor addressed the same issue in a proposed amendment to regulations governing the limits of asbestos exposure for asbestos workers. In printing the proposal in the Oct. 9, 1975, Federal Register, OSHA said it recognizes that there is no assurance of a safe exposure for a substnace with known carcinogenic properties, in this case asbestos, and thus there should be no detectable concentrations."

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