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Shipyard Workers of 1940's Told of Cancer Peril

By JANE E. BRODY
Special to The New York Times

LOS ANGELES, Sept. 29—An expert on environmental medicine warned here today that the millions of men and women who were directly or indirectly exposed to asbestos while they worked in shipyards in World War II faced the possibility of an imminent "epidemic" of a once-rare cancer.

The cancer is called mesothelioma, a tumor of the lining of the chest or abdomen. At present, it is invariably fatal, although the lives of some victims can be prolonged for as long as five years.

Research indicates that mesothelioma as caused primarily by exposure to asbestos particles, which lodge in body tissues and remain there indefinitely, the expert, Dr. Irving J. Selikoff, told the Seventh National Cancer Conference.

Dr. Selikoff, who has been studying the effects of exposure to asbestos for two decades, is director of the Environmental Sciences Laboratory at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York.

Studies by Dr. Selikoff have shown that 7 per cent of asbestos insulation workers succumb to mesothelioma. Now, the doctor said, it appears that even people who did not work directly with asbestos but who were indirectly exposed to asbestos particles may also be in danger of developing the disease, which tends to occur about 30 years after the initial exposure to asbestos.

Among those now in danger, Dr. Selikoff said, are the 3¼ million Americans who worked in shipyards in the early nineteen forties. His warning was echoed by Dr. Frank Rauscher, director of the National Cancer Institute, who urged such workers to get periodic checkups, including chest X-rays.



The New York Times
Dr. Irving J. Selikoff

Dr. Selikoff said that he and others had already noticed a dramatic increase in the occurrence of mesothelioma, which a decade ago accounted for only one or two deaths in 10,000.

Dr. Selikoff said that the British, whose shipyards were rebuilt about five years before American shipyards geared up for the war effort, began noticing mesothelioma cases among former shipyard workers four years ago.

"Such cases are already being seen in our country," he told the meeting, which is sponsored by the National Cancer Institute and the American Cancer Society. "In the past year, a number of such World War II mesotheliomas have been brought to our attention.

"The last five cases had worked in East or West Coast shipyards—as an electrician, a tinsmith, an engineer, a steamfitter and a welder."

None worked directly with asbestos, he said, but were undoubtedly exposed indirectly by co-workers who did.

A sixth case that he investigated was a man who died of mesothelioma at the age of 30 and who had never worked in a shipyard. But much asbestos was found in the man's lungs, and, his history showed, he was born in 1940 just two blocks from the Brooklyn Navy Yard.

Dr. Selikoff also expressed concern about the possible risks faced by people in the general urban population who had neither direct nor indirect occupational exposure to asbestos but were likely to inhale the tiny particles from a wide variety of environmental sources. These sources, he said, include buildings under construction, papier-mâché, asbestos-lined air-conditioning ducts, brake linings and some ironing board covers.

United States production of asbestos has increased from 500,000 tons a year in 1930 to four million tons a year currently, he said.

Dr. Selikoff added that analysis of air samples from 60 American cities showed that all had asbestos particles in the air, and that nearly everyone on whom an autopsy was performed was found to have some asbestos particles in his lungs.

In asbestos workers, the mineral particles have also been found to enhance the development of smoking-related lung cancer, which kills 20 per cent of these workers.

Mesothelioma occurs as multiple tumors that, in the chest, produce such symptoms as pain, coughs and a sense of fullness. The disease can be detected in its early stages by chest X-ray.

In the abdomen, however, early symptoms rarely occur, and it is not until the abdomen swells late in the disease that it is usually diagnosed, Dr. Selikoff said. Although the disease cannot now be cured, the useful lives of many patients can be prolonged by surgery, radiation and chemotherapy.

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