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Asbestos Detected in Test of Drugs

By JANE E. BRODY

A number of injectable drugs widely used in medicine have been found contaminated with particles of asbestos, a mineral that has been linked to the development of cancer and other diseases in man.

Contamination with the particles, often exceeding levels found in other parts of the environment, was detected in two studies by a research team at Mount Sinai School of Medicine here.

The researchers showed that one-third of the tested samples of 17 popular drugs contained the harmful particles. All the drugs tested, which included many common antibiotics, are administered only by intravenous or intramuscular injection under medical supervision.

"We have no idea how serious this contamination is, since we don't know what happens to humans injected with asbestos," said Dr. Irving J. Selikoff, who directs the asbestos research at Mount Sinai.

"But," he added, "at higher doses than we found in the drugs, asbestos can produce cancer when injected into laboratory animals. In view of the possibility that it could produce cancer at lower doses in man, we consider it prudent to get rid of this mineral in drugs, especially since its presence is unnecessary."

In response to an inquiry, the Food and Drug Administration said it was about to embark on its own study of asbestos contamination of drugs "in an effort to corroborate" the Mount Sinai findings, which were published in the current issue of the journal Science.

Results of the first study, done in 1969, were reported to the F.D.A. in October of that year and "taken under advisement" by the Federal agency, but no action was taken then. The second study, on samples gathered in 1970 and 1971, showed that the drugs still contained significant amounts of asbestos fibers.

The Mount Sinai team, Drs. William J. Nicholson and Carl J. Maggiore and Dr. Selikoff, all experts in environmental medicine, suspect that asbestos filters used in manufacturing the drugs are the source of the contamination.

Dr. Armond Casola, chief chemist of the F.D.A.'s Bureau of Drugs, said that if such filters were found to be a source of the asbestos fibers, he would recommend their discontinuance. He added that "adequate substitutes are available."

The finding of asbestos particles in drugs is one in a long list of environmental sources of the mineral fibers. The air breathed by most urbanites contains such fibers, which are used in fireproofing building, lining air-conditioning ducts and in brake linings, among many other uses.

Dr. Selikoff and his colleagues have demonstrated that chronic exposure to asbestos fibers can present serious health hazards. He has found that among asbestos workers, deaths from a variety of cancers—including cancer of the lung and of the gastrointestinal region—are far more common than among the general population.

Asbestos - related diseases have also been found to occur more often than expected among people exposed to the fibers by virtue of having lived with an asbestos worker or lived in the vicinity of asbestos operations.