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Rare, Fatal Cancer Is Showing Up Among Those Handling Asbestos

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By Thomas O'Toole
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A fatal cancer of the chest and abdominal cavities is cropping up among the Nation's asbestos workers.

So rare that 20 years ago it wasn't even in the medical textbooks, the cancer is called mesothelioma, and seems almost peculiar to people exposed to asbestos.

But oddly, those stricken with the deadly disease include a nurse whose father worked in an asbestos plant and a man who handled asbestos for no more than a month while he insulated the plumb line in his own home.

Any suspicion the disease gets might come from too soon. More than 1 million tons of asbestos is consumed annually there alone in the United States, with more than 500,000 men being reported for the first time as at least 100,000 asbestos workers.

In the United States, more than half of whom did not begin working with asbestos until 10 years ago.

In terms of the number of persons involved, the apparent asbestos peril may be even greater than that posed by uranium mines. Last May, Labor Secretary W. William Phillips established the first Federal radiation limits for underground uranium mines in a ruling that set an estimated 150 men had died from lung cancer in a mining population never higher than 500.

Mesothelioma was first mentioned in 1920, when a South American doctor found 22 cases among the people living and working in the Cuzco of Peru. Some doctor turned up 57 more cases in the next two years.

Nobody knows how many means have had mesothelioma. Even today, doctors have trouble spotting it whether they're trying to diagnose it in a person still

alive or pin it down at autopsy.

But in three separate studies in the last three years, doctors have turned up 51 cases. Oddly, 11 of them appeared to have had no real exposure to asbestos. But the other 40 either worked with asbestos, lived with people who did or lived in neighborhoods where the air was laden with asbestos dust.

The first American study was one run in 1934 by Dr. Irving J. Selikoff of New York's Mount Sinai Hospital. Tracing the lives of 512 New York area members of the Asbestos Workers Union who were on the union rolls before Jan. 1, 1913, Dr. Selikoff found that 115 of them had died by Jan. 1, 1933.

Some of what he found did not surprise him. For example, 15 of the 115 died of asbestosis, a long-known but dangerously fatal lung and chest disease brought on by years of breathing in asbestos dust.

But Dr. Selikoff also found that 45 of the men had died of lung cancer, a rate 55 times higher than that in the normal adult male population. Even more surprising, he found five deaths due to mesothelioma.

Dr. Selikoff then launched a follow-up study of 277 construction workers among asbestos insulation workers throughout the world. Next, again, to his surprise, he turned up 10 deaths due to mesothelioma.

About the same time, the Pennsylvania State Department of Health began a similar study to find how mesothelioma might be affecting the more than 200 asbestos workers employed about the state.

The Department sent questionnaires to 152 hospitals in the southwestern part of the state, asking the hospitals to report all mesotheliomas diagnosed between 1933 and 1937.

Back came 42 documented cases of the disease, only 11 of which could not be traced to asbestos exposure.

Ten victims of the disease turned out to be men who worked in asbestos plants. Eight were people who lived near asbestos plants most of their lives. There were members of families who had one or more asbestos worker members—a Springfield girl whose father was an asbestos worker, a young woman whose father had worked for 15 years in an asbestos plant and a woman with two sons who worked as asbestos insulators in a shipyard.

Of 10 deaths that seemed to have only a "questionable" connection with asbestos exposure, five turned out to be almost bizarre. One was a young chemist who worked almost his entire life around a large boiler covered with asbestos insulation that flaked off at the touch. Another was a worker in a brewery, whose beer is filtered through pulp filters made essentially of cotton fiber and asbestos.

The most convincing study is the most recent one—conducted by a team of doctors working out of Middlesex General Hospital in New Brunswick, N.J., a few miles from the Nation's largest asbestos plant, one that employs 500 workers.

In the past three years, no fewer than 19 cases of mesothelioma proved themselves with direct General. One was of the 12 men and workers at the nearby asbestos plant, one a woman who apparently inhaled asbestos dust in laundering her husband's work clothes, the second a spinner who lived one block from the plant.

A relatively new disease, mesothelioma is also one of the most difficult diseases to confront modern medicine.

It is almost impossible to treat. Middlesex General's Dr. Maxwell Barrow says that even the most potent anticancer drugs have no effect on it. About all that radiation treatments do, he says, is remove some of the fluid that builds up in the lungs from the disease.

The disease is 100 per cent fatal," Dr. Barrow states, "and usually takes less than a year after diagnosis to run its course."

Nobody knows why it attacks some asbestos workers and not others, or why some victims of the disease get it after an apparently mild exposure to asbestos. The University of Michigan School of Medicine cites one case of a man who was exposed to asbestos for about a month while he insulated his house. Six years later, he was dead of mesothelioma.

Even the nature of the disease is still mysterious. While it is generally known that the disease attacks the lining of the chest and abdomen, nobody knows how it gets there.

When asbestos dust is inhaled, the fibers get trapped in the lungs, where they form gummy deposits. This explains how asbestos gets started, and perhaps even lung cancer. One theory is that the gummy substance that builds up around the asbestos fiber lodged in the lung can cause cancer elsewhere in the body. But now does it do it? Nobody knows.

Because it is such a new and little understood disease, mesothelioma is also creating some serious social and economic problems.

No state lists the disease in its workmen compensation laws, so nobody afflicted with it can be paid damages for his affliction. Even now, the first test cases are in the courts, where they may conceivably stay for the next 5 to 10 years.

The fact that nobody knows how much exposure to asbestos can bring on the disease has created controversy, too.

First laws stipulate that asbestos workers be in an environment where there is no more than five million particles of asbestos dust per one cubic foot of air—a regulation that many in the asbestos industry fought years to get approved.

But with mesothelioma, the disease might be brought on by exposure to as little as one-tenth of one hundredth that limit.

Despite obstacles like these, research has begun in a hand.

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A worker operates a bridge in a Canadian asbestos insulation plant.

ful of places to find out more in the disease. He's doing research, in an earlier time about the Silness Mammal with a \$3500 grant from the period, states Dr. W. D. Nor-

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members of the Asbestos are in the New Jersey plant. Future may be very extensive

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has started a similar program organizations before he got it takes 20 years of exposure to

with Hahnemann Hospital to including the American Can asbestos to bring on most

to recover more information. der Society and the Public cases of the disease. If this

Middlesex General's Dr. Health Service. is so, says Dr. Norwood, "large

Borow says that he is in the Some doctors think the numbers of malignancies are

process of setting up a travel beginning. "Since the really substantially increase in the

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