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Blue asbestos clue to five deaths

Dr Alfred Byrne
Medical Correspondent

FIVE WOMEN have died in Nottingham from a form of cancer linked with asbestos after they had handled the substance for a short time while assembling gas masks during the war.

All had been fitting filters containing crocidolite ("blue asbestos") into respirators at a local factory under contract to the Ministry of Supply. All died within two years of the appearance of symptoms from a highly malignant tumour of the covering of the lung called pleural mesothelioma. The latent period between the end of exposure and the onset of symptoms was from 20 to 24 years.

The first patient in whom the tumour was diagnosed insisted that she had been a housewife all her life [illegible] the [illegible]. Finally, [illegible] more closely questioned about her earlier life, she recalled that she had once worked [illegible] masks for a short while when she was a girl.

These cases have been discovered by a consultant pathologist at Nottingham City Hospital. He is one of a nationwide team of specialists attempting to assess what degree of exposure to asbestos is necessary to produce mesothelioma of the pleura and the [illegible] where it strikes less often.

He and his colleagues at other Nottingham hospitals have found [illegible] further 14 fatal cases of [illegible] among male patients at the City and other Nottingham hospitals.

The men either had a history of exposure to asbestos or were found to have substantial amounts of asbestos in the lungs post mortem. The maximum latent period from exposure to onset was 53 years and the minimum was seven years. Most of the patients had been working for small [illegible] insulating or [illegible] minor role that it might not be remembered as a danger.

Mesothelioma is a comparatively newly-recognised tumour that is now generally accepted as being caused by asbestos dusts, of which crocidolite seems to be most often the culprit. Although the condition is invariably fatal, it should be added for the benefit of those personally concerned, that by no means all of those who were at one time exposed to the dust [illegible] the [illegible] Moreover, its incidence is minute compared with that of the lung cancer caused by cigarette smoking.

Nevertheless, from 80 to 100 new cases a year are currently being notified to the special registry set up by the Medical Research Council's unit in Penarth. Moreover, the general impression that increasing numbers of cases are being discovered.

A year after I first drew public attention to the risk (in 1965) this [illegible] growth was made a "prescribed" disease under the Industrial Injuries Act for people employed in certain asbestos industries [illegible]

[illegible] solicitors acting [illegible] Asbestosis [illegible] Society now propose to [illegible] the [illegible] of a 53-year-old worker in a heating and ventilating firm, who died recently [illegible] mesothelioma, and [illegible] to be the first of many [illegible] of its kind.

The same solicitors have about [illegible] cases of men suing their employers for damages on account of asbestosis incurred in the course of their work. Others [illegible] have many similar cases on their books and last [illegible] court at Durham [illegible] awarded a total of £58,000 damages to seven men with asbestosis.

Asbestosis, which was once the most common of the lung dust diseases known as the pneumoconioses, now takes second place to mesothelioma with about 40 to 50 cases being diagnosed each year. It would, however, be a grave mistake to underrate the significance of asbestosis and the plight of its victims.

Asbestosis is a form of fibrosis (scarring) of the lung whose main symptom is shortness of breath. Moderate and advanced sufferers tend to deteriorate even after escaping from the source of the dust; about 50 per cent of them run the added risk of getting cancer of the lung as distinct from mesothelioma—a fact of which they are aware. Sufferers find it hard to work and ever harder to find a new job since would-be employers are afraid the men will die on their hands.

There seems little doubt that last week's judgment will help to [illegible] a flood of fresh actions. I understand that some of the other employers facing claims are worried at the size of the awards.

As against this, I spoke to one man, an insulation worker with 50 per cent disability, who now has a pension of only £2 7s a week supplemented by the maximum hardship allowance of [illegible] He will be pressing his claim against his own employers in the belief that he is entitled to considerably more than he previously thought acceptable.