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Info Gathering

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Many ex-Conwed employees have asbestos-linked illnesses

BY GEORGIA SWING
Staff writer

A majority of former Conwed workers who took part in a union-sponsored health screening in Cloquet this summer have been found to have asbestos-related diseases, a doctor who helped conduct the screenings said Thursday.

Of the 280 workers screened in June, 61 percent have diseases directly linked to exposure to asbestos, said Dr. David W. Bonham of Pulmonary Health Associates of St. Paul.


Dr. David Bonham

The screening, sponsored by Local 158 of the United Paperworkers International Union, turned up evidence of two diseases, Bonham said: asbestosis, a scarring of the tissue inside the lung; and asbestos-related pleural disease, a scarring and thickening of the tissue surrounding the lung.

The diseases usually aren't fatal, but they worsen over time, Bonham said. Advanced cases sometimes lead to cancer — most commonly lung cancer, he said.

None of the workers screened in June was found to have cancer, he said.

However, some workers diagnosed as having serious health problems — including two with a rare form of asbestos-caused cancer called mesothelioma — were not included in the screening, he said.

Most cases of asbestos-related disease found through the screening were mild, he said.

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Unfortunately, with time ... that may increase. It's likely that quite a few of them would develop lung cancer in coming decades," Bonham said. He added that it's impossible to say what a worker's odds are of developing cancer.

The chances of getting cancer are much greater if the worker smokes, and the union will mount an effort to help workers quit smoking, he said.

The percentage of workers with asbestos-related diseases is "pretty typical in any industry where you've got a long-term exposure but the exposure hasn't been absolutely devastating," said Michael Polk, an attorney with the Minneapolis law firm hired by the union.

About 120 former Conwed workers with asbestos-related health problems have announced their intention to file lawsuits against the makers and distributors of asbestos materials used at Conwed, Polk said.

Workers can't sue Conwed because, under state law, work-related injuries must be handled by workers' compensation, he said.

The Cloquet health screenings were arranged after several workers were diagnosed as having asbestos-related diseases, union officials have said.

Asbestos, a fire retardant, was used at Conwed's Cloquet plant in making acoustical tiles and mineral boards between 1957 and 1974, according to the union. Use of asbestos was curtailed in the United States after the early 1970s when its potential health hazard became widely known.

Representatives of Conwed, which sold its Cloquet plant last year to USG Acoustical Products, declined comment on the use of asbestos.

Screening participants got the results of their tests by letter this month, and overall results were discussed at a closed union meeting Thursday night.

William McCullough, 56, was one of the workers who met in the Scanlon Community Center with Bonham, Polk and union officials.

Because McCullough's letter with screening results apparently was lost in the mail, he didn't learn until Thursday that he has asbestosis.

The news came as a shock, he said.

"Right now I don't have any insurance," said McCullough, unemployed since Conwed ceased operations last August.

"I imagine I'll have to see a doctor," he said. "I'll see what I have to do and how I'm going to live with it."

McCullough worked at the Cloquet plant almost 32 years. He doesn't have shortness of breath, the main symptom of asbestosis, but "I coughed a lot at night," he said. "I didn't know what it was. I'd get up and take cough medicine."

He said he doesn't know whether he'll file a lawsuit, and he's not sure where to direct his anger.

As far as Conwed is concerned, "I earned a living there, I raised my kids. Why should I be angry?"

But, he said, "If people knew this type of material causes asbestosis and knowingly used it ... that's where I'm angry."

He gave a short laugh. "You live till you die, and that's the truth. The only thing is you don't want to go through hell before you die."

Allan Backa, 60, who worked at the Cloquet plant for 39 years, said he has been diagnosed as having mild asbestosis.

"This has bothered me psychologically since we started with it ... but I've learned to live with it," said Backa, who manages the office of the union local.

He's talked to many workers who have been told they have asbestos-related disease, Backa said. "I've noticed that some are very depressed and some are taking it very gracefully. ... There's an awful lot of concern."

Based on his firm's experience with lawsuits against the makers and distributors of asbestos products, Polk said he believes the Conwed workers have an "excellent case."

There is no treatment for asbestosis and asbestos-related pleural disease, Bonham said. "There is no reversing the scar tissue formation," he said.

However, the cancers that sometimes develop can be treated successfully, he said.

People with mild cases of asbestosis often have no symptoms, he said. "If it's mild, the person can live with it and die of other causes," he said.

As the disease progresses, the patient will have shortness of breath, he said.

Union leaders will decide this fall whether to sponsor similar screenings at other plants they represent, said Clare Sullivan, union occupational health specialist who coordinated the Cloquet screening.