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U.S. Warned of Asbestos Peril

By Thomas O'Toole
Washington Post Staff Writer

The Government has been told that the Nation's 350,000 shipyard workers face a serious occupational hazard from the asbestos in their place of work.

The warning was given last September to the Navy, the Labor Department and the Public Health Service by New York's Mount Sinai Hospital, where autopsies have shown that most men who worked in shipyards had "excessive" asbestos fibers in their lungs, a condition that often leads to serious lung disease.

So far, the three Federal departments have made no public acknowledgment of the report or its contents.

Autopsies have been done on about 1500 persons who died in Mount Sinai, Elmhurst Hospital in Queens and Veterans Administration Hospital in the Bronx in the last two years. Roughly half of these had asbestos traces in their lungs, but a staggering 80 per cent of 70 men who had been shipyard workers at one time in their lives had "considerable" asbestos fibers in their lungs. Some of these men had spent as little as one week as shipyard workers.

Asbestos Dust

"The incredible thing is none of these men were asbestos workers," said Dr. Irving J. Selikoff, director of Environmental Medicine at Mount Sinai yesterday.

Dr. Selikoff explained that only about 1 per cent of the men working in shipyards handle asbestos directly, but that most shipyard work is confined to such small places, like ship's holds, that just about all shipyard workers "inhale asbestos dust on the job."

The 70 ex-shipyard workers on whom autopsies have been performed so far by Mount Sinai had been electricians, boiler makers, steam fitters, welders, riveters and engineers—men who never handle asbestos.

Mount Sinai's study follows one in Britain where asbestos hazards in four Royal Dockyards were examined. The results were reported in a recent issue of The Annals of Occupational Hygiene, a British medical journal.

Asbestosis Victims

In the past year, the report said, dockyard workers from no fewer than 12 different occupations (from engine fitter to stoker) had been accepted by British health authorities as victims of asbestosis, a chronic inflammation of the lungs that causes shortness of breath and heart disease.

The men in ten of these 12 occupations work in small, "machinery spaces," where they breathe in asbestos fibers by accident. Of an estimated 50,000 workers in the four British dockyards, only 4[illegible] come in direct contact with asbestos.

A fatal cancer of the chest wall called mesothelioma has cropped up in dockyard workers in five different occupations, the British report said. This is a cancer almost peculiar to asbestos workers, and yet none of the victims mentioned in the British study worked with asbestos. They were boiler makers, fitters, welders, shipwrights and general laborers.

Mount Sinai's Dr. Selikoff said that he and a team of doctors have yet to analyze the shipyard workers for cause of death. He also said that his team will study another 2[illegible] autopsies done in the last [illegible] years for evidence of asbestos in the lungs.

But it seems clear there is a problem here," Dr. Selikoff said. "That is why I brought it to the attention of the Gov[illegible]