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U. S. DEPARTMENT OF
HEALTH, EDUCATION AND WELFARE
Public Health Service
Division of Occupational Health

PROFESSIONAL RELEASE
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

December 9, 1966

Cincinnati, Ohio: Exposure to high levels of asbestos dust 20 to 30 years ago are probably responsible for a 21% increase in the death rate among certain workers in a large group recently studied by the Public Health Service.

This excess was due to cancer of the lung and gastrointestinal tract and to asbestosis. In other asbestos-using industries studied where dust levels were relatively low even though there was long-term exposure, the death ratio were much lower.

The report was presented to 22 experts on environmental disease attending a Conference on Asbestos Research sponsored by occupational health officials of the Public Health Service here this week.

"While dust levels have been sharply reduced in the asbestos textile industry where the excess mortality was found, the finding adds to the growing evidence that asbestos exposure is associated with cancer of the lung," said Dr. Murray C. Brown, Chief of the Division of Occupational Health, who made the report.

Dr. Brown's report was based on research being conducted by Dr. Philip Enterline of McGill University and Dr. Mildred Kendrick of the Division of Occupational Health. Their data is taken from the Social Security Administration records for 21,755 men who had worked in the three industries and from death certificates from State health departments.

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The Conference was held to exchange information on asbestos research programs now underway and to identify gaps in research as well as areas needing greater attention.

The conferees agreed on the need for a broader attack on the many problems related to asbestos as an industrial as well as a potential environmental contaminant. High on the list of research priorities were studies of population groups with both heavy and light exposures to asbestos fibers. In making such investigations the types of asbestos as well as other associated factors must be considered in evaluating both types of exposures. It was pointed out that is is not known whether asbestos mineral fibers are vehicles or carriers of carcinogenic chemicals or are active themselves.

The group stressed that there must be expanded laboratory animal studies of the effects of different types of asbestos dusts, alone and in combination with various metals and hydrocarbons. They said that present methods for the accurate indentification of asbestos fibers in tissue are inadequate and must be improved.

There was also concern about the need for standardization of diagnostic methods, better diagnostic terminology for pathologic and radiographic description of lung changes and pleural tumors. Similiarly, techniques for the collection, identification, and quantitation of asbestos fibers in the industrial and community environment need refinement and standardization.

"This latest information indicates that asbestos is causing problems, and we intend to move rapidly toward an intensified program to get answers to some of the more urgent questions," Dr. Brown told the conferees.

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In the meantime, it is important that those producers and users who are not showing proper regard to the health hazards of asbestos dust institute controls which have already been shown to reduce the dust problem."

"While we really do not know how controls can be applied in all of the endless varieties of work situations and sites, these questions can be answered through the types of diligent painstaking work that have been outlined at this meeting," Dr. Brown concluded.

Asbestos is a generic term applied to a number of fibrous crystalline silicate minerals. Although chemically they are grouped as hydrated silicates, there is a great variation in the degree of hydration, complex composition of the silicate, and physical properties of the crystalline fibrous structure. These differences make it difficult to assess the fibers' effects on the lung.

Although asbestos has been known for centuries, it has only been a mineral of significant industrial importance for about 75 years. With outstanding properties of chemical resistance, fibrous structure, and incombustibility, the material is used in practically every major industry. Over one million workers are involved in the manufacture or handling of asbestos products.

Major applications include textile manufacturing, felts, ropes, roofing and flooring materials, asbestos-cement pipes, gaskets, insulation, special papers, filters, plastics, and brake linings.

Current domestic consumption of the mineral in the manufacture of asbestos products is nearly 800,000 tons. Of the three forms of asbestos, chrysotile accounts for about 95 percent of this figure, with amosite at

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at about 20,000 tons and crocidolite at about 10,000 tons making up the remainder. Because most of the mineral is imported into this country, researchers in the field feel that the greatest potential health problems in America exist for those who work with asbestos rather than for those who mine it.

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