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AGENCY ACCUSED ON HEALTH RULES

Ex-H.E.W. Physician Says Memos on Asbestos Peril Angered Labor Aides

By DAVID BURNHAM
Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, July 17—A former Government physician said today that a superior told him to stop embarrassing the Labor Department after he provided several of its regional directors with new information about the health hazards faced by workers in three factories with high levels of asbestos.

The former official, Dr. William M. Johnson, said he believed that these instructions about his asbestos memorandum had been partly the product of an attempt within the Labor Department to encourage political contributions from businessmen by diluting the enforcement of the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970.

The Senate Watergate committee earlier this week made public a memorandum from George C. Guenther, a former Assistant Secretary of Labor, that said that, while the potential of using health standards "as a sales point for fund-raising" had been discussed, "I do not believe the full potential of this appeal is fully recognized."

The Health Research Group, an organization started by Ralph Nader, the consumer advocate, said that the Guenther memorandum "in itself established a conspiracy to deprive millions of workers of their health and lives" and could "only be described as murder in the marketplace."

Memos Sent in 1972

Dr. Johnson, in a telephone interview, said that in the summer of 1972 he sent memorandums concerning asbestos health problems in three factories to several regional directors in the Labor Department.

At the time he sent the material, Dr. Johnson was an official in the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health. An agency in the Department of Health, Education and Welfare that is responsible for recommending the health standards that are enforced by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration in the Labor Department.

"I never got any answer from O.S.H.A., the responsible agency with the Labor Department," he said. He added:

"What I did get was word from my headquarters in Washington that my action was not appreciated by Labor. I was also told the memos could cause embarrassment. Finally, I was asked whether I was trying to start a Congressional investigation."

Dr Johnson said the official who had criticized his sending of the memorandums was Dr. Howard McMartin, an assistant director of the institute.

Work Through the System

Dr. McMartin, in response to an inquiry, said, "None of us here question Dr. Johnson's sincerity and integrity. When I called him, I wasn't questioning what he did, but how he did it. You have to try to work through the system."

Men working in factories with too much asbestos in the air are in danger of developing asbestosis, a scarring of the lungs, and lung cancer.

Dr. Johnson, who is 33 years old, went to medical school at Stanford University in California and then the School of Public Health at Harvard University.

Now completing his residency in internal medicine at the University of Arizona in Tucson, Dr. Johnson said he had left the National Institute of Occupational Health and Safety because he was "losing confidence in occupational health medicine." He said, "I didn't like the atmosphere at N.I.O.S.H. The compromises bothered me."

Dr. Johnson said a second example of the pressure to block meaningful health standards for workers was the continuing resistance to the development of explicit regulations.

No Specific Standards

"There was a constant pressure to cool it," he said. "For example, the standards spelling out requirements for medical examinations for workers in dangerous jobs were not to be too rigid, too specific."

Another factor cited by Dr. Johnson to support his belief that there was a deliberate Government policy of blocking the development of health standards was the promulgation by the Labor Department of regulations involving only one substance although guidelines for 15 others had been proposed.

The accusations that the government had failed to move on health standards came at a time when there are at least 35 bills pending in Congress to weaken the authority of the Labor Department in this area.

Senator Harrison A. Williams Jr., Democrat from New Jersey, yesterday denounced officials in the Nixon Administration for "dragging their feet at every turn" concerning health standards. Mr. Williams's Senate Labor subcommittee has scheduled hearings on the subject next Monday.

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