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ASBESTOS FOUND IN DULUTH WATER

E.P.A. Links Fibers in Lake to Industrial Discharge

June 16, 1973

By JANE E. BRODY

The Environmental Protection Agency disclosed yesterday that "high concentrations" of potentially dangerous asbestos fibers had been found in the drinking water of Duluth and surrounding Minnesota communities that use Lake Superior for their water supply.

The source of the fibers, the agency said, is believed to be the discharge of waste from the Reserve Mining Company, a taconite processing plant that has been embroiled in an anti-pollution suit for several years.

The company, whose plant in Silver Bay, Minn., 55 miles northeast of Duluth, has been dumping 67,000 tons of taconite tailings into the lake daily for 16 years, called the charges unfounded and said there was no indication that the tailings presented any hazard to the drinking water.

While there is no health effect known to be associated with the ingestion of asbestos fibers, the Federal agency recommended that communities using Lake Superior water find alternative sources of drinking water for very young children.

In studies over the last two decades, Dr. Irving J. Selikoff, an expert on environmental medicine at Mount Sinai Hospital here, showed that the inhalation of asbestos fibers can cause a chronic lung disease called asbestosis and cancer of the lungs, stomach and colon.

In an interview yesterday, Dr. Selikoff said his laboratory had identified the asbestos fibers in the Duluth water as being the same type (amosite) that has been implicated in half the deaths among workers in a Paterson, N.J., asbestos plant. These workers experienced three times the expected death rate from cancer of the gastrointestinal tract.

"It can be assumed that anyone who inhales asbestos fibers also ingests them, but there have been no pure studies of the effects of ingestion in humans," Dr. Selikoff said.

Dr. Lawrence Plumlee, a physician on the staff of E.P.A., said that limited studies in animals have indicated that when asbestos is placed in the stomach, it rapidly enters the blood stream and is widely distributed to tissues throughout the body.

The agency said it had asked Dr. Selikoff to determined within 60 days the average accumulation of asbestos fibers in the tissues of residents of the Duluth area. Using tissues obtained at an autopsy, Dr. Selikoff and his colleagues at Mount Sinai will compare asbestos accumulation in residents with that of asbestos workers and of persons believed to have minimal exposure to the persistent mineral fibers.

Dr. Selikoff and Dr. E. Cuyler Hammond of the American Cancer Society have already begun outlining studies to determine whether the residents of the Duluth area might have already shown evidence of asbestos-related health effects.

But even if no definite or potential health effect can be readily defined, the finding of asbestos particles in the water supply is expected to strengthen the Government's case against the Reserve Mining Company, the company is the only major industry dumping anything in Lake Superior, whose waters have long been regarded as the most pristine of the Great Lakes. Besides Duluth, three communities in Minnesota, one in Wisconsin and one in Michigan use the once-thought extremely pure water of the lake for drinking purposes.

The E.P.A. said it was trying to develop treatment methods that would rid the drinking water of asbestos fibers. However, Dr. Plumlee said that with the average concentration of fibers at about 100 billion per liter of water, "we don't know how effective these methods will be."

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