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Latest word on asbestos won't be the last

Scientific evidence against asbestos continues to accumulate, and OSHA's much-delayed exposure standard goes on bringing criticism from all concerned parties. Meanwhile, millions of workers remain exposed to asbestos dust in plants throughout the world.

□ Bad news about asbestos continues to make headlines. In September, for instance, Joseph A. Califano, Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW), drew attention to an alarming statistic in a new study by the National Cancer Institute (NCI) and the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS): An astonishing 17% of all cancer deaths in the U.S. over the next few decades will be linked to some previous exposure to asbestos.

Speaking at the AFL-CIO National Conference on Occupational Safety and Health, Califano said that the NCI/NIEHS report definitely rejects the conventional estimate that 1 to 5% of all U.S. cancer incidence is related to occupational exposure to carcinogenic agents. Estimates of 20% to as high as 38% are not unreasonable, he added.

EXPOSURE THAT KILLS—The joint

study estimates that between 8 and 11 million U.S. workers have been exposed to asbestos since the beginning of World War II. Of these, about 4 million have been "heavily exposed,"—i.e., worked directly with the material most of the time—and 4 to 7 million have received "peripheral" exposure—e.g., of the sort that a maintenance worker would get in a plant where asbestos was being installed.

The NCI/NIEHS report assumes that 20 to 25% of those in the first group will die of lung cancer, 7 to 10% of pleural or peritoneal mesothelioma (a particularly lethal cancer), and 8 to 9% of gastrointestinal cancer. Assuming that the risk to the second group is 25% that of the first one, the report concludes that a total of 2.15 million workers will die over the next 30 to 35 years, or about 67,000 per year. This

represents a whopping 17% of all cancers detected annually in the U.S.

The joint study's figures on exposure for workers are taken from HEW estimates (the department believes that 1.5 to 2.5 million U.S. workers are still being exposed to asbestos), while the fatality percentages are borrowed directly from a World Health Organization (WHO) position paper issued in early 1977. This link with the WHO document is confirmed by Joseph Wagoner, special assistant for carcinogenesis with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), who was a member of the group of health experts that authored the WHO study.

Meanwhile, a spokesman for NCI/NIEHS says that the joint report is basically an update of epidemiological data on asbestos, in the light of new information uncovered in the past year.

Whatever its origin, the NCI/NIEHS work is attracting its share of criticism by way of an attack on Califano's recent statement. Some claim that the HEW secretary is unnecessarily alarming the public. Asbestos no longer causes widespread sickness because working conditions have changed, they say.

Dr. Irving J. Selikoff, a well-known authority on asbestos, and director of Mt. Sinai Medical Center's Environmental Health Laboratory (New York City), notes that "Califano's remarks are projections based on limited data, and probably represent an upper limit." But he warns that even if Califano's figures are off by a factor of two, the problem is enormous.

However, a spokesman for the American Cancer Soc. (ACS), New York City, feels that the NCI/NIEHS report does overstate the problem.

INDUSTRY RESPONSE—The Asbestos Information Assn. (AIA), Arlington, Va., an organization of asbestos processors, says that the NCI/NIEHS data are being analyzed by the group's scientific advisors, and that a statement will be issued when the study is complete. Meanwhile, an AIA press release calls the report "simply another extrapolation in statistical terms from the same data which have been available to the international scientific community for some time."

Another AIA press release, issued in response to a Califano statement (made in April) regarding a large



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