Asbestos

SELIKOFF CALLS FOR WIDER SAFEGUARDS; CONTROL ADEQUACY, DATA MEANING DEBATED

MONTREAL — (By a BNA Staff Correspondent) — A ban on the use of asbestos will not be requested if "proper control" of exposure is achieved in the wide spectrum of workplaces where fibers are found, according to Irving J. Selikoff, director of the Environmental Sciences Laboratory of the Mount Sinai School of Medicine.

Selikoff made his remarks May 25 during the opening session of the World Symposium on Asbestos, a three-day meeting sponsored by the governments of Canada and Quebec and the Commission of the European Communities (see related article in this issue). Other first-day speakers discussed varying effects of different fibers, diagnostic and analytic uncertainties, and adequacy of existing controls.

Industry has "done what it can" to limit exposure in asbestos mines and mills but now must expand its efforts to control it in workplaces where asbestos products are used, Selikoff told the symposium. The remaining disease problems, he warned, will be found among construction workers and others who work where there are "virtually no controls, respirators, or instruction."

Turning his remarks to Johns-Manville Corporation, the world's largest asbestos producer, Selikoff stated, "You deserve credit for what you have done, but you must do more." He said he agreed with the industry position that the disease cases seen today are the result of past exposure, but added, "The exposure now will result in future disease."

Selikoff urged the asbestos industry to begin a surveillance and notification program of exposed workers. Noting that cessation of cigarette smoking has been found to contribute to a reversal of disease risk in previously exposed workers, he argued that companies have the responsibility to inform workers of past exposure and warn them of the effects of smoking. In addition, he said, "virtually no exposed workers are under surveillance," asserting that periodic medical examinations could make early cures possible.

Fiber Types, Uncertainties

Epidemiologists have not made progress in helping society control the risks of asbestos exposure since the basic data were reported 20 years ago, according to John Corbett McDonald, head of the McGill University Institute of Occupational Health and Safety. Conclusions still must be reached concerning a dose-response relationship and variations between the effects of different asbestos fiber types, he told the session.

Noting that only four cohorts of workers have been studied using individual exposure estimates — Quebec miners and millers, New Jersey factory pensioners, New Orleans cement workers, and South Carolina textile workers — McDonald contended that "it would still be very rash to say that we know what the dose-response relationship is for mesothelioma," the cancer of the pleural lining of the lung linked almost exclusively to asbestos exposure.

Substantial differences have been found, he said, between the effects of amosite and crocidolite asbestos and the more widely used chrysotile type. While he has seen no evidence of crocidolite use without a hazard, "it is probably possible" to use chrysotile safely in such products as brake linings, McDonald maintained. He speculated that health effects "depend perhaps on the size and type of fiber."

Remaining uncertainties also were stressed by John Higginson, until recently the director of the International Agency for Research on Cancer, and Hans Weill, professor of medicine at Tulane University.

Weill maintained that diagnosis of asbestos-related disease "continues to be a problem after nearly a century." He argued that four of the six indicators used to detect asbestos-related disease are "non-specific" and commonly found in both patients with the disease and those without it.

The medical researcher characterized diagnosis as a question of "weighing the probabilities based on the total picture, including exposure." He reported that a forthcoming document prepared by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health and the College of American Pathologists will recommend that, when available, both lung fibrosis and a demonstrated finding of fibers in the lung are needed for adequate diagnosis from tissue samples.

Weill also contended that no definitive mortality data have linked pleural plaques to mesothelioma. With some rare exceptions, he said, no functional consequences can be expected from benign plaques.

Higginson, discussing science's limited understanding of the variables of cancer causation in general, predicted that research in the next decade into the mechanisms of carcinogenic action will aid regulators in determining what alternative preventive measures should be taken. Better comprehension of which factors initiate the formation of tumors and which promote or deter their growth may help scientists determine an "operational threshold," the conditions under which no effect can be found, he urged.

Mazzocchi, Rietze Debate Control

Industry and labor representatives disagreed over the state of current controls in the workplace. William B. Rietze, chief environmental scientist and vice president of Johns-Manville Sales Corporation, argued that currently available controls allow asbestos to be used "safely and effectively without any measurable health effects." But Anthony Mazzocchi of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers International Union called for a moratorium on asbestos use until a "meaningful" plan of controls is implemented.

Rietze detailed a wide range of control devices, including vacuum units that can be used with saws, drills, and other small power tools. "Today we have adequate engineering technology available to reduce asbestos fiber levels in virtually all instances where asbestos is mined, milled, and manufactured, and in those areas where asbestos-containing products are used," he summarized. "Even in those few areas where control is somewhat difficult, such as demolition or routine maintenance work, there are methods that can be used to reduce the asbestos fiber to acceptable levels," Rietze asserted.

Mazzocchi contended that, with a few exceptions, management has been negligent in controlling exposure. Less than one percent of workplaces surveyed by OCAW were in compliance with exposure standards, he said, arguing that scientific evidence, while somewhat persuasive to manufacturers, has not changed the attitudes of user employers.

Only a moratorium, in which a complete inventory of uses and exposures would be conducted, would end the "criminal" exposure of workers that has occurred over "15 years of haranguing" over science, the labor official stated. "You don't have to be a scientist to see the absence of controls," he argued.

Third-party liability litigation has done more to advance the cause of removal and substitution than regulations, Mazzocchi maintained. "Regulations have not changed the lives of workers," he asserted, saying unions "would totally immobilize the regulatory agencies if we were to complain every time."