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Pipe-Cancer Tie Stirs Furor

By FRANK RITTER

Metro councilmen and a Vanderbilt University professor clashed verbally yesterday over what prompted the professor to infer recently that asbestos cement pipe might cause cancer.

Dr. James Snell, assistant professor at the Vanderbilt school of medicine was questioned at length by Councilman James Hamilton about a letter he wrote recently in which he raised the cancer question.

"THE IMPLICATION of your letter," Hamilton told Snell during a council committee meeting, "was that Metro Council, under the guise of saving a few cents, was going to place hundreds of thousands of people in danger of getting a dread disease—cancer.

"We certainly don't want to do that. And coming at the time it did, and in the alarming way it was written and distributed to the public, it would seem to me the letter was unfair."

The meeting, a joint session of the finance and public works committees of Metro Council, was called to consider whether the city should permit asbestos pipe companies to bid on Metro pipe contracts.

Cast iron pipe has been used exclusively, although it is more expensive initially than asbestos pipe, for at least 40 years in the Nashville water system.

HAMILTON asked Snell yesterday if there have been any studies to determine if iron oxide from cast iron pipe might cause cancer. Snell replied that there have been no such studies, to his knowledge.

"There has been no research," Hamilton asked, "on whether asbestos cement pipe or cast iron pipe can cause cancer, has there?"

Snell said there has not been.

Hamilton said if Snell was sincere in raising the question about asbestos pipe, he should have raised the same question about cast iron pipe.

"I think it is perfectly reasonable to raise such a question" about cast iron pipe, Snell replied.

"WOULD YOU raise the question, doctor?" asked Councilman James LaPenna.

"I would be very happy

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Pipe-Cancer Tie Stirs Forum

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to write the Public Health Service about it," Snell answered. "The whole question of contamination of food and water should be raised, in my opinion."

Snell sent his letter last November to Robert L. Lawrence, Metro waterworks director, supporting Lawrence's decision to prohibit asbestos cement pipe manufacturers from bidding on Metro waterpipe purchases.

The professor said he would consider the use of asbestos pipe "a medical hazard of significant degree" until the Public Health Service has checked it out completely.

EXPLAINING TO the councilmen yesterday that he had no ulterior motive in writing the letter, Snell said:

"I regret the vindictive attitude that some people have against me, merely as a result of my raising this question."

"I'm not vindictive against you, doctor," Hamilton interrupted. "In fact, I had never met you until now. It just seems to me that a scientist is under a requirement to state all factors in a case."

"I don't think you understand how this came about," Snell said. "I simply raised thought that before Nashville undertakes to buy large amounts of asbestos pipe, this question should be raised.

"IF YOU DESIRE to raise the same question about cast iron pipe, then I think it is very reasonable. I have no political motive. I have no financial interest in these pipe companies. I am not aligned politically with any group."

Hamilton reacted angrily at this statement by Snell and declared:

"We're not inquiring, doctor, into your political alignments, your religion, or anything else."

The exchange between the councilmen and Snell followed presentations by representatives of both Clow Corp., which has supplied all Metro waterpipe the past four years, and Johns-Manville Sales Corp., an asbestos pipe dealer seeking to bid on pipe purchases here.

K. RAYMOND Augst, assistant district sales manager for Johns-Manville, told the councilmen that there are strong indications Metro could save 34% on its pipe purchases if the city permitted the asbestos pipe firms to bid.

Augst said Metro bought $1.3 million worth of cast iron pipe from July, 1966, to September, 1967. Asbestos pipe, Augst added, would have cost only $864,000 — giving Metro a savings of $459,000.

Lawrence has defended buying the more expensive pipe on grounds it is better and has "a greater factor of safety."

However, Johns - Manville representatives insisted yesterday that their product will serve the city equally as good as cast iron pipe if it is installed properly.

SHORTLY AFTER Snell wrote his letter last year to Lawrence, raising the question of whether asbestos pipe could cause cancer, the Metro Health Board took a similar stand.

The board voted Jan. 17 to "not approve the use of asbestos pipe" until sufficient information could be obtained to prove if it is medically safe.

Yesterday, at an early morning meeting, the board voted to reconsider its stand on the basis of evidence submitted by Johns-Manville Co. representatives.