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Officials Accused of Playing Politics

In April, U.S. Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare Joseph Califano somberly announced that more than 5.6 million Americans would die as a direct result of their exposure to asbestos fibers.

In September, Califano said the results of a recent study by the National Cancer Institute showed that between 21 and 38 percent of all cancer is caused by exposure to carcinogens in the workplace.

Califano also said that 17 percent of all cases of cancer, according to the NCI report, can be traced to exposure to asbestos.

These alarming figures were released at a politically advantageous moment—before a national AFL-CIO health and safety meeting in Washington.

Though there is almost no doubt that a strong link exists between cancer and exposure to asbestos fibers, there is some concern that the government is playing the numbers game for political advantage.

For years, industry sources have been contending that somewhere between 1 and 5 percent of all cancers are caused in the workplace. Scientists for the American Cancer Society have placed the level between 5 and 15 percent.

A few scientists and industry officials have charged that this sudden jump to as high as 38 percent is totally unwarranted.

At least one scientist involved in the NCI study reportedly has backed down a little, saying the September report was only a "working draft" and not the final word on the subject.

Califano's assertion that 17 percent of all cancers can be traced to asbestos exposure also drew criticism from some scientists—at least one of whom presented evidence to Congress that the figure is closer to 1 percent.

It is estimated that 365,000 Ameri-

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cans will die of cancer this year. If Califano's 17 percent figure is right, it would mean that 62,050 of them would have died because of exposure to asbestos. If the 1 percent figure is right, the number would be 3,650.

Either way, a lot of people are involved. But both figures can't be right—and scientists contend government officials should not alarm the public until they're sure what they're talking about.

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