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HEW Warns of Asbestos Hazard in Work With Brake Linings, Spackling Mixtures

A WALL STREET JOURNAL *News Roundup*

Government agencies renewed warnings about exposure to asbestos, a commonly used mineral that scientists say can cause serious and disabling lung disease, including fatal lung cancer.

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, a research arm of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, said in a letter to health experts that garage personnel who change or grind brake linings are being exposed to potentially hazardous levels of airborne asbestos. The letter, written by J. William Lloyd, director of NIOSH's office of occupational health surveillance, said that although a systematic study of these workers hadn't been made, levels of asbestos dust are high enough to cause damage and that four cancer deaths associated with such work had been reported.

Another arm of HEW, meanwhile, said it found "alarming" a study that showed various spackling compounds used for home repairs contain concentrations of asbestos sufficient to cause disease. The study, by scientists at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York who have studied the harmful effects of asbestos in various occupations, appeared recently in Science, a publication of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Exposure at Home

Commenting on the report, David P. Rall, director of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, said, "These findings suggest the possibility of significant exposure during home construction and repair."

"Additional work by the (Mount Sinai) scientists suggests that members of the entire household or other occupants may also inhale asbestos fibers," Mr. Rall added.

"These results are alarming when considered in relation to other evidence being accumulated by the Mount Sinai group that indicates that far less than the intense exposure of the work environment is capable of producing asbestos-related disease," he said.

The Environmental Sciences Laboratory of Mount Sinai, which under the direction of Dr. Irving J. Selikoff has been the leader in research on the dangers of asbestos, reported in Science that it had analyzed 15 samples of spackling, patching and jointing compounds purchased in New York City and found that five contained appreciable amounts of asbestos. "Use of these materials in home repair work (for example, mixing, sanding and cleanup) may expose the user (and other members of the household) to significant concentrations of asbestos," they said.

Warnings Urged

The scientists said that, even more important, none of the spackling compounds contained warning labels or indications that it contained hazardous materials. They urged that such labels be required, with instructions for safer usage.

The Mount Sinai scientists were also responsible, in part, for the NIOSH warnings about brake-drum linings. The NIOSH letter noted that the Mount Sinai investigators had determined that workers engaged in the maintenance and repair of automobile and truck brake linings "are exposed to potentially hazardous levels of airborne asbestos dust."

One of the scientists said in an interview that particularly large amounts of dangerous asbestos dust were created in maintenance shops where the large asbestos linings of trucks and buses were ground to fit the brake drum or were resurfaced after use. He said that the changing of asbestos brake linings for automobiles was also dangerous because mechanics usually use an air hose to blow out the loose dust after removing the old lining.

NIOSH estimated that as many as 900,000 workers are exposed to asbestos in the manufacturing and servicing of brake linings and clutches, most of whom are auto mechanics. The agency recommended, as an interim procedure, that repair shops designate a segregated area for all brake and clutch repairs and that signs be posted in those areas pointing out the dangers of asbestos dust. It also said that repairmen should wear respirators when doing such work, and that strong vacuum cleaners be used to remove asbestos dust from brake drums before working on them.

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