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Malignancies in Asbestos Workers - A Preliminary Report -

Within recent years and months there has been a considerable amount of material in the literature which indicates that asbestosis is directly related to the incidence of malignant tumors and cancer.

As early as eight years ago a Pennsylvania pathologist reported that he had seen at autopsies many cancer cases in persons who also suffered from asbestosis. The pathologist is on the staff of a hospital which receives most of the patients from a nearby town where a large asbestos plant is located. This plant makes asbestos textiles and also brake linings and clutch facings. The findings of the pathologist have created concern in the asbestos industry and it was felt appropriate for our health department to review the problem.

To obtain as complete a story as possible the record rooms of six hospitals which draw their cases particularly from the area of the asbestos plant were searched for cases where asbestosis was considered during the period between 1956 and 1964. Seventy-five hospital records coded as asbestosis were located. These were people who either were diagnosed on admission, on x-rays, or at autopsy to have asbestosis or asbestosis was mentioned in the differential diagnosis.

After obtaining the 75 records, an attempt was made to locate these former patients. A large number were no longer alive and their survivors had to be contacted. For these 75 an occupational and smoking history was obtained from their survivors and/or from plant management. Seven either had not worked at this particular asbestos plant or the diagnosis had been rejected.

This left 68 asbestos workers who had worked in one particular plant. Further study of these records showed that 21 among them not only had evidence of asbestosis but also were suffering from cancer. Twelve of these had lung cancer and nine had various other growths such as bladder cancer, leukemia, etc. The smoking history of the 12 lung cancer cases revealed that five had never smoked which is more or less the same distribution of smokers versus non-smokers as in the general population. Of the nine cases with other malignancies, two never smoked and three were cigar smokers only.

Another interesting feature was that among the other cancers, not the lung cancers, there was one case of a malignant mesothelioma.

Another interesting finding was that of the 21 cases with cancer 13 worked in the textile department of the plant and four worked in brake line manufacture. The department where one man worked remains unknown and the rest worked at various other jobs.

Two of the 11 lung cancer cases and one of the lymphoblastoma cases had worked in the asbestos plant for a total of only six months which is a rather short exposure, and one wonders how much this short exposure may have contributed. Eighteen of these 21 cases had started work in the plant prior to 1940 and 12 had started work prior to 1920.

Of the 21 cases of cancer 11 were born before 1900 and only one was born after 1910.

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