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Rare, Fatal Cancer Is Showing Up Among Those Handling Asbestos

By Thomas O'Toole
Washington Post Staff Writer

A fatal cancer of the chest and abdominal cavities is cropping up among the Nation's asbestos workers.

So rare that 20 years ago it wasn't even in the medical textbooks, the cancer is called mesothelioma, and seems almost peculiar to people exposed to asbestos.

But oddly, those stricken with the deadly disease include a nurse whose father worked in an asbestos plant and a man who handled asbestos for no more than a month while he insulated the plumbing in his own house.

Any attention the disease gets might come none too soon. More than 1 million tons of asbestos is consumed annually these days in the United States, with more than 3000 separate uses being reported for the fiber. There are at least 100,000 asbestos workers in the United States, more than half of whom did not begin working with asbestos until 10 years ago.

In terms of the number of persons involved, the apparent asbestos peril may be even greater than that posed by uranium mines. Last May Labor Secretary W. Willard Wirtz established the first Federal radiation limits for underground uranium mines following disclosure that an estimated 115 men had died from lung cancer in a mining population never higher than 5600.

Mesothelioma was first spotlighted in 1960, when a South African doctor found 32 cases among the people living and working in the Cape of Good Hope asbestos fields. The same doctor turned up 57 more cases in the next two years.

Nobody knows how many Americans have had mesothelioma. Even today, doctors have trouble spotting it — whether they're trying to diagnose it in a person still

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Fatal Cancer Is Showing Up Among Asbestos Workers

alive or pin it down at autopsy.

But in three separate studies in the last three years, doctors have turned up 71 cases. Oddly, 11 of them appeared to have had no real exposure to asbestos. But the other 60 either worked with asbestos, lived with people who did or lived in neighborhoods where the air was heavily laden with asbestos dust.

The first American study was one run in 1964 by Dr. Irving J. Selikoff of New York's Mount Sinai Hospital. Tracing the lives of 632 New York area members of the Asbestos Workers Union who were on the union rolls before Jan. 1, 1943, Dr. Selikoff found that 255 of them had died by Jan. 1, 1963.

Some of what he found did not surprise him. For example, 12 of the 255 died of asbestosis, a long-known but decreasingly fatal (due to antibiotics) disease brought on by years of breathing in asbestos dust.

But Dr. Selikoff also found that 45 of the men had died of lung cancer, a rate 6.6 times higher than that in the normal adult male population. Even more surprising, he found five deaths due to mesothelioma.

Dr. Selikoff then launched a follow-on study of 307 consecutive deaths among asbestos insulation workers throughout the whole Northeast. Again, to his surprise, he turned up 10 deaths due to mesothelioma.

About the same time, the Pennsylvania State Department of Health began a blind study to find how mesothelioma might be affecting the more than 5000 asbestos workers scattered about the state.

The Department sent questionnaires to 162 hospitals in the southeastern part of the state, asking the hospitals to report all mesotheliomas diagnosed between 1958 and 1963.

Back came 42 documented cases of the disease, only 11 of which could not be traced to asbestos exposure.

Ten victims of the disease turned out to be men who worked in asbestos plants. Eight were people who lived near asbestos plants most of their lives. Three were members of families who had one or more asbestos worker members—a 3-year-old girl whose father was an asbestos engineer, a nurse whose father had worked for 35 years in an asbestos plant and a woman with two sons who worked as asbestos insulators in a shipyard.

Of 10 deaths that seemed to have only a "questionable" connection with asbestos exposures, two turned out to be almost bizarre. One was a Swiss cheesemaker, who worked almost his entire life around a large boiler covered with asbestos insulation that flaked off at the touch. Another was a worker in a brewery, where beer is filtered through pulp filters made essentially of cotton fiber and asbestos.

The most convincing study is the most recent one—conducted by a team of doctors working out of Middlesex General Hospital in New Brunswick, N.J., a few miles from the Nation's largest asbestos plant, one that employs 5000 workers.

In the past three years, no fewer than 19 cases of mesothelioma passed through Middlesex General. Only two of the 19 were not workers at the nearby asbestos plant, one a woman who apparently inhaled asbestos dust in laundering her husband's work clothes, the second a spinster who lived one block from the plant.

A relatively "new" disease, mesothelioma is also one of the most difficult diseases to confront modern medicine.

It is almost impossible to treat. Middlesex General's Dr. Maxwell Borow says that even the most potent anticancer drugs have no effect on it. About all that radiation treatments do, he says, is remove some of the fluid that builds up in the lungs from the disease.

"The disease is 100 per cent fatal," Dr. Borow states, "and usually takes less than a year after diagnosis to run its course."

Nobody knows why it attacks some asbestos workers and not others, or why some victims of the disease get it after an apparently mild exposure to asbestos. The University of Michigan School of Medicine cites one case of a man who was exposed to asbestos for about a month while he insulated his house. Six years later, he was dead of mesothelioma.

Even the nature of the disease is little understood. While it is generally known that the disease attacks the lining of the chest and abdomen, nobody knows how it gets there.

When asbestos dust is inhaled, the fibers get trapped in the lungs, where they form gummy deposits. This explains how asbestosis gets started, and perhaps even lung cancer. One theory is that the gummy substance that builds up around the asbestos fiber lodged in the lung can cause cancer elsewhere in the body. But how does it do it? Nobody knows.

Because it is such a new and little understood disease, mesothelioma is also creating some serious social and economic problems.

No state lists the disease in its workmen compensation laws, so nobody afflicted with it can be paid damages for his affliction. Even now, the first test cases are in the courts, where they may conceivably stay for the next 5 to 10 years.

The fact that nobody knows how much exposure to asbestos can bring on the disease has created controversy, too.

Most laws stipulate that asbestos workers be in an environment where there is no more than five million particles of asbestos dust per one cubic foot of air—a regulation that many in the abestos industry fought years to get approved.

But with mesothelioma, the disease might be brought on by exposure to as little as one-tenth or one-hundredth that limit.

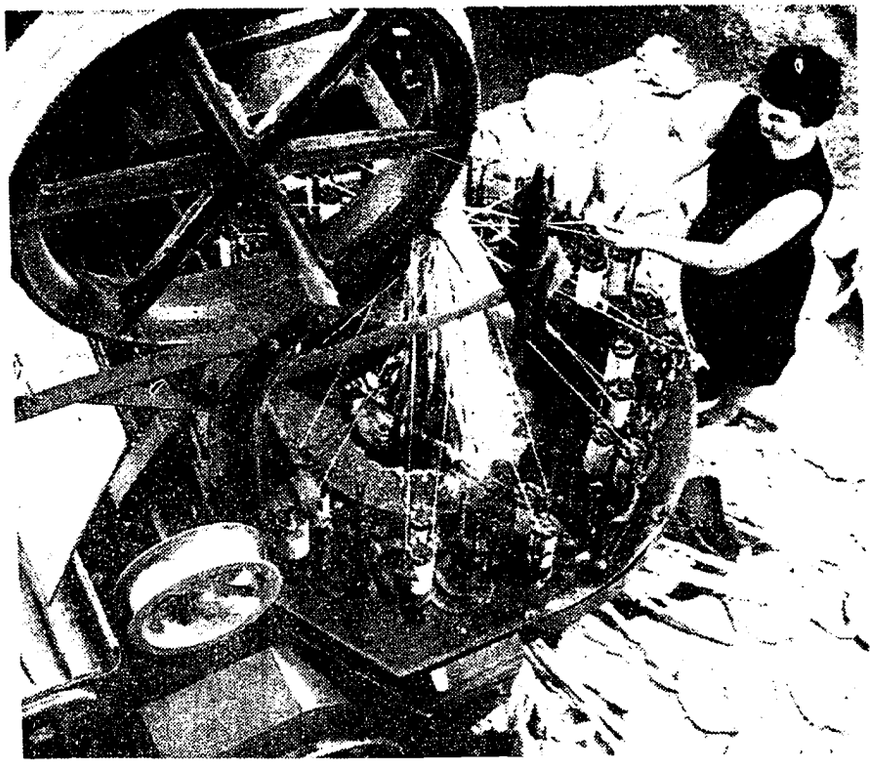
Despite obstacles like these, research has begun in a handful of places to find out more about the ailment. Mount Sinai's Dr. Selikoff is now constantly monitoring the 1500 members of the Asbestos Workers Union in metropolitan New York. The Philadelphia local of the same union has started a similiar program with Hahneman Hospital to uncover more information.

Middlesex General's Dr. Borow says that he is in the process of setting up a traveling exhibit to bring attention to the disease. He's doing it with a $3500 grant from the Papermakers Union, which represents the asbestos workers in the New Jersey plant Dr. Borow studied.

It wasn't easy getting the money. Dr. Borow went to 40 organisations before he got it —including the American Cancer Society and the Public Health Service.

Some doctors think the mesothelioma problem is just beginning. "Since the malignancies now being recognized relate to an earlier time period," states Dr. W. D. Norwood, of Richland, Wash., "the health problem in the future may be very extensive and serious."

Indeed, it may be true, as many doctors think, that it takes 20 years of exposure to asbestos to bring on most cases of the disease. If this is so, says Dr. Norwood, "large numbers of malignancies are beginning to occur and will substantially increase in the near future."



A worker operates a braider in a Canadian asbestos insulation plant.

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