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Asbestos Pipe, Cancer Tie Hit

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By JIM SQUIRES
Staff Correspondent

NEW YORK — There is no evidence to support a recent statement by a Nashville doctor that use of asbestos—cement water pipe might cause cancer, a noted cancer researcher said here yesterday.

Dr. George Wright, chairman of The Institute for Occupational and Environmental Health, said he did not think such a relationship "will ever be established."

WRIGHT, HEAD of the department of medical research in internal medicine at St. Luke's Hospital in Cleveland, Ohio, said a letter from Dr. James Snell, an assistant professor at Vanderbilt University school of medicine, suggesting such a relationship "apparently arises out of an incomplete perspective" of the problem.

Wright spoke to nine Metro councilmen here to tour a Johns-Manville plant in Newark, N.J., a manufacturer of asbestos-cement pipe.

Snell sent a letter last month to Metro waterworks director Robert L. Lawrence supporting Lawrence's decision to prohibit asbestor-ce-

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ment manufacturers from bidding on Metro waterpipe purchases.

The council committee on purchasing had suggested that Lawrence allow asbestos-cement manufacturers to bid because the product is less expensive than the cast iron pipe now being used.

SNELL WROTE that asbestos is a known cause of cancer and can contaminate drinking water. The physician said he did not believe this fact had been brought to the attention of the U.S. Public Health Service.

Wright, an adviser to the U.S. Public Health Service, said the asbestos-cement pipe industry had long been aware of a link between certain types of asbestos fibers and lung cancer and with Mesothelioma, a rare malignant tumor found on the lung covering and the gastrointestinal tract.

He pointed out, however, that asbestosis (a lung tissue disease) and lung cancer are caused only by inhalation of certain asbestos fibers in large amounts and over long periods of time.

MESOTHELIOMA, he said, has never been linked positively with swallowed amounts of asbestos and is "extremely rare."

"Evidence of research indicates that virtually everyone is exposed to asbestos fibers," he said. "In fact, it would appear reasonable to assume that there is no such thing as not having been exposed. If mere exposure is a cause, we would all have it."

Wright cited widespread use of asbestos fibers in insulation, electrical wiring and stove-ovens and toasters.

"THERE IS A great upswing in the use of asbestos fiber, but the incidence of cancer has actually fallen off," Wright said.

Wright said asbestos-cement pipe, consisting of 20% asbestos fiber, has been in water systems in some areas for as long as 30 years. In many instances, he said, there is no evidence of wear in these pipes to release asbestos fiber.

"After this many years of experience, if these fibers were to be a source of Mesothelioma — a dramatic tumor — it would be known," Wright stated.

"THIS WOULD not escape. This is not a new point of interest to the industry," he added.

Wright said manufacturers of asbestos products were among the first to discover its possible biological effects and have spent "millions of dollars" in the field.

The doctor said he is preparing a written answer to Snell's statement.

"I don't know Snell or his background in this area," Wright said, "but no doctor is knowledgeable in all areas. I have spent much of my life in this field, and even I am not."

SNELL WROTE Lawrence Nov. 14, stating he would consider the use of asbestos-cement pipe "a medical hazard of significant degree" until the U.S. Public Health Service had checked it out completely.

Officials of the Johns-Manville Co., asked about this yesterday, said the Public Health Service is among its customers.

"We have sold them thousands of feet of pipe," said Jay Baker, product manager. "I feel certain we will sell them much more."

THE COUNCILMEN are scheduled to tour the manufacturing plant and research center today. The company claims its product will save Metro $300,000 a year on pipe purchases.