

Memo to Editors

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FROM: Dr. Thomas C. Chalmers
President, Mount Sinai Medical Center
New York, New York

Recent media reports concerning research on talcum powder carried out by the Mount Sinai Medical Center created considerable confusion on the part of the public. The Medical Center has issued the following statement in order to correct any misinterpretation or misimpressions the media reports may have generated.

Dr. Thomas C. Chalmers
President, Mount Sinai Medical Center
New York, New York

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New York, New York

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New York, N. Y. -- Recently data from research carried out in the Mount Sinai Medical Center for the last four years on the asbestos content of some talcum powders was cited in the press before it had been published in a scientific journal. The original purpose of this research was to develop effective techniques for measuring the presence of asbestos in talc. The problem has practical implications because prolonged exposure to certain forms of asbestos can cause cancer. The research work was of the highest technical quality and a significant contribution to the field. However, in the process of developing these new methods, the samples actually used had been purchased more than two years ago, a fact which was not mentioned in the media reports. Furthermore, the discovery of asbestos in some talcum powders by the Mount Sinai investigators was reported to the Food and Drug Administration at that time, and undoubtedly stimulated some manufacturers to change their sources of talc, so that recent analyses by the FDA have not revealed appreciable amounts of asbestos in any samples.

The Mount Sinai Medical Center wishes to correct certain confusions which the reporting of these data may have generated:

1) Any implication in the news stories that most of the talcum powder currently on the market contains asbestos is not borne out by the most recent data from the FDA, although continuing surveillance is indicated.

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2) Although the news media specifically emphasized the dangers of talcum powders advertised for babies, the only baby powder tested that was reported to show asbestos represents less than 1% of the market, and that sample was five years old. The most commonly used baby talc has been consistently free of asbestos.

3) It is the opinion of Mount Sinai's Department of Pediatrics that baby talc is a useful and safe product.

Education of the public in respect to health matters is an important responsibility of Academic Health Centers. Educational efforts by such centers must be based on sound scientific principles and must be calculated to provide maximum benefit for the community.

Dissemination of research data on which health recommendations can be based must occur via peer-reviewed scientific publications. The inevitable existence of conflicting data requires that information be made available first to other properly trained experts who may be expected to interpret them individually or through official agencies or committees. The latter is slow but appreciably more reliable than public debates that are fragmented in the reporting.

This experience emphasizes the need for constant vigilance in ensuring that the transition period between discovery of important health related items and their revelation to the public is handled with proper attention to the accuracy of details, as required in scientific publications.