MICHAEL J. BENNETT

Crying wolf about asbestos

Irving J. Selikoff is something of a hero among American environmentalists. His research studies on the health effects of asbestos spawned a nationwide effort to outlaw asbestos and mandate asbestos cleanups in public buildings. It also helped establish the doctrine that there is no such thing as a safe level of exposure to such carcinogens as asbestos.

There are two huge problems with the Selikoff work. One is that it no longer enjoys the support of the scientific community. The second is that the basic medical credentials of Dr. Selikoff, winner of the Albert Lasker award, the nation's most prestigious scientific prize, are open to question.

Dr. Selikoff's original 1950s and 1960s studies were based on World War II shipyard workers exposed to asbestos levels literally millions of times higher than those faced by building occupants today, even in the worst-case scenarios. Those early studies failed to account for the fact that exposure to the common "white" asbestos found in 95 percent of all buildings is toxic only when exposures are extremely high over a long period of time, as contrasted to the blue and brown varieties used among many of the workers in Dr. Selikoff's original World War II studies. They also ignored the fact that most of the World War II workers smoked, which had a tremendous bearing on their cancer mortality rates.

Dr. Selikoff's early critics were overlooked or silenced by the environmental movement, unions and the media. Over time, however, they became too numerous and too distinguished to ignore. They included such people as Sir Richard Doll of Oxford University, who first established the link between smoking and cancer; Dr. Malcolm Ross of the U.S. Geological Survey; Dr. Morton Corn of Johns Hopkins University; Dr. Patrick Sebastian of McGill University in Montreal; Dr. Andrew Chiurg of the University of British Columbia; and Dr. John E. Craighead of the University of Vermont.

Even Dr. Selikoff, who is retired from Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York, has backed away from his earlier estimates of the "excess cancer" deaths caused by asbestos annually. Those estimates have shrunk from 40,000 in 1978 to 20,000 in 1980 to 10,000 in 1981 and 8,200 in 1983. Indeed, Dr. Selikoff in 1986 told Environmental Action magazine, "If you take averages, there is very little risk."

Yet the Selikoff work continues to have dramatic and deleterious effects on our lives. His studies established the assumption that there is no safe level of exposure for such manmade carcinogens as asbestos fibers. That is still the orthodox position of the Environmental Protection Agency and other federal regulatory agencies, and asbestos, used primarily now as a fireproofing material in buildings, is the key to the EPA's efforts to ban such materials.

"If we can't ban asbestos, we can't ban anything," Dr. John Moore, former administrator and current deputy administrator of EPA, has testified before Congress. EPA, acting on the "one fiber can kill" theory, has proposed a total ban on all uses of asbestos, including brake linings in cars, trucks and planes.

The proposed EPA ban of asbestos has been opposed by the World Health Organization, the International Labor Organization as well as every foreign government on record. The organizations fear that the ban would produce a ripple effect through U.S. aid that would prevent, for example, the use of asbestos cement pipe for irrigation and public-health uses. That would effectively outlaw irrigation pipes, since the only safe alternative is cast iron, which is prohibitively expensive.

In America, the ban could cost commercial building $200 billion to $1 trillion, and actually multiply cancer cases many times over. Ripping out the mineral's inhalable fibers and dumping them in landfills causes 80 cases of cancer as opposed to one case from all uses of asbestos, according to the EPA division responsible for disposal.

To add to the intrigue, Dr. Selikoff's medical credentials are a matter of dispute. He has claimed at various times in his career to have earned his medical degree in both Great Britain and Australia, halfway across a war-torn world, in the same year, 1941.

The two universities cited by Dr. Selikoff, the University of Melbourne and the Royal College, Scotland, both deny issuing such a degree in 1941. Official records, and an earlier biographical reference book, Medical Directory of the United Kingdom, 1962, note that Dr. Selikoff actually earned the basic British medical degree, which falls somewhere beneath the American doctorate of medicine, at the Royal College in 1945.

Yet in the 1941-45 period Dr. Selikoff says he served as a fellow in pathology at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York, an intern at Newark, N.J., and a resident at Sea View Hospital in New York. If the British records are accurate, he participated in these programs without the prerequisite doctorate.

In short, if the epidemiological evidence against Dr. Selikoff's work isn't enough to persuade bureaucrats to rethink our asbestos policy, perhaps the dispute about his credentials is. Either way, policymakers should abandon the "one fiber can kill" theory before they discover that the alternatives are sure to be even more deadly.

Michael J. Bennett, whose series of articles on asbestos won the top prize of The Detroit News in 1985, is the author of a forthcoming book, "Asbestos Hysteria."

The Washington Times

FRIDAY, APRIL 21, 1989

HWBUI0005025