FILE NAME: Newspaper & Magazine Articles (NMA)

DATE: 1968

DOC#: NMA204

DOCUMENT DESCRIPTION: Washington Post Story Referred to in Minutes of Shipbuilders Council of America, Apr. 2, 1969 -U.S Warned of Asbestos Peril

U.S. Warned of Asbestos Peril

By Thomas O'Toole
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The Government has been told that the Nation's 350,000 shipyard workers face a serious occupational hazard from the asbestos in their place of work.

The warning was given last September to the Navy, the Labor Department and the Public Health Service by New York's Mount Sinai Hospital, where autopsies have shown that most men who worked in shipyards had "excessive" asbestos fibers in their lungs, a condition that often leads to serious lung disease.

So far, the three Federal departments have made no public acknowledgment of the report or its contents.

Autopsies have been done on about 1000 persons who died in Mount Sinai, Elmhurst Hospital in Queens and Veterans Administration Hospital in the Bronx in the last two years. Roughly half of these had asbestos traces in their lungs, but a staggering 90 per cent of 70 men who had been shipyard workers at one time in their lives had "considerable" asbestos fibers in their lungs. Some of these men had spent as little as one week as shipyard workers.

Asbestos Dust

"The incredible thing is none of these men were asbestos workers," said Dr. Irving J. Selikoff, director of Environmental Medicine at Mount Sinai yesterday.

Dr. Selikoff explained that only about 1 per cent of the men working in shipyards handle asbestos directly, but that most shipyard work is confined to such small places, like ship's holds, that just about all shipyard workers "inhale asbestos dust on the job."

The 70 ex-shipyard workers on whom autopsies have been performed so far by Mount Sinai had been electricians, boiler makers, steam fitters, welders, riveters and engineers—men who never handle asbestos.

Mount Sinai's study follows one in Britain where asbestos hazards in four Royal Dockyards were examined. The results were reported in a recent issue of The Annals of Occupational Hygiene, a British medical journal.

Asbestosis Victims

In the past year, the report said, dockyard workers from no fewer than 12 different occupations (from engine fitter to stoker) had been accepted by British health authorities as victims of asbestosis, a chronic inflammation of the lungs that causes shortness of breath and heart disease.

The men in ten of these 12 occupations work in small, "machinery spaces," where they breathe in asbestos fibers by accident. Of an estimated 50,000 workers in the four British dockyards, only 4[illegible] come in direct contact with a[illegible]bestos.

A fatal cancer of the che[illegible] wall called mesothelioma h[illegible] cropped up in dockyard wor[illegible]ers in five different occup[illegible]tions, the British report sa[illegible] This is a cancer almost pecu[illegible]liar to asbestos workers, a[illegible] yet none of the victims me[illegible]tioned in the British stu[illegible] worked with asbestos. Th[illegible] were boiler makers, fitte[illegible] welders, shipwrights and g[illegible]eral laborers.

Mount Sinai's Dr. Selik[illegible] said that he and a team of d[illegible]tors have yet to analyze the[illegible] shipyard workers for cause[illegible] death. He also said that[illegible] team will study another 2[illegible] autopsies done in the last [illegible] years for evidence of asbes[illegible] in the lungs.

But it seems clear there[illegible] problem here," Dr. Selik[illegible] said. "That is why I brough[illegible] to the attention of the Gov[illegible]ment."