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TEST FOR CANCER SET IN MINNESOTA

2 Doctors to Check on Risk From Asbestos in Water

By JANE E. BRODY

Two international experts on environmentally caused cancer left last night for Duluth, Minn., to set up a crash testing program to try to determine whether asbestos fibers detected in the city's drinking water presented a risk of cancer to its 100,600 residents.

The source of the fibers, according to an announcement by the United States Environmental Protection Agency last week, was believed to be the 67,000 tons of waste rock tailings that have been dumped daily for the last 16 years into Lake Superior by the Reserve Mining Company, a taconite processing plant in Silver Bay, Minn. The tailings have been found to contain asbestos particles.

Duluth and at least eight other communities bordering Lake Superior use water from the lake, once thought to be extremely pure, for drinking purposes.

Study of Tissues

The two cancer experts, Dr. E. Cuyler Hammond, biostatistician for the American Cancer Society, and Dr. Irving J. Selikoff, who heads the Environmental Sciences Laboratory at Mount Sinai Hospital here, will compare the accumulation of asbestos fibers in the tissues of Duluth residents with that of asbestos workers and of people with no known exposure to the mineral.

Dr. Selikoff has set up his staff to work 12-hour shifts around the clock so that results of the tissue tests, done on organs obtained at autopsy, might be available in a few weeks.

"In light of the seriousness of the potential hazard, we are condensing three months' work into three weeks," Dr. Selikoff said in an interview before leaving for Minnesota.

His concern stemmed from findings by him and his colleagues, as well as by other researchers, which showed that abestos workers had high death rates from cancer of the lung, stomach and colon. Through the years, these workers accumulated and retained large amounts of asbestos fibers in their body tissues.

In asbestos workers, whose exposure to the fibers has been mainly through inhalation, the asbestos-caused cancers generally did not show up for 20 or 30 years. It was not known whether consumption of the fibers through drinking water would present a similar risk.

However, Dr. Selikoff said, "if the residents of Duluth have similar accumulations of asbestos as do the asbestos workers, we can pretty well predict what's going to happen 5 or 10 years from now."

At the same time, Dr. Hammond and the American Cancer Society will analyze the death records of 3,000 Duluth residents who have been part of a national cancer survey of one million persons followed since 1959. Dr. Hammond will look for possible early signs of increased deaths from cancer, particularly that of the gastrointestinal tract.

Dr. William J. Nicholson, a biophysicist from Dr. Selikoff's laboratory, which is a research center for the National Institute for Environmental Hea Sciences, went to Duluth y terday morning to begin a lyzing samples of the city's and water and locally ma factured food products.

The Reserve plant at Sil Bay, which extracts iron pellets from taconite ro mined along the Minnesota Ir Range, has been involved a court battle with state a Federal agencies that ha been trying for a decade stop the company's pollution Lake Superior.

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