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Asbestos Held Cancer Source

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One out of five asbestos insulation workers in metropolitan New York now dies of lung cancer, an eminent physician told Congress yesterday.

"If these figures are projected to the country as a whole, and if no improvement in the health hazards these men face is achieved," said Dr. Irving J. Selikoff, "we may look forward to perhaps 6000 deaths of lung cancer and perhaps 15,000 deaths of cancer in general in this single asbestos trade alone."

Dr. Selikoff is professor of Community Medicine at New York's Mt. Sinai Hospital and president-elect of the prestigious New York Academy of Sciences.

Testifying before the House Select Labor Subcommittee, Dr. Selikoff said these statistics "come as no surprise" to asbestos industry observers.

"In 1935," said Dr. Selikoff, "Dr. Kenneth M. Lynch, now Chancellor of the University of South Carolina, described the case of lung cancer in a man who also had asbestosis," a combination he said was rare. But since then, Dr. Selikoff said, "numerous similar cases of this association were recorded."

The New York doctor told told the Subcommittee, which is holding hearings on President Johnson's proposed Occupational Safety and Health Act, that nobody has taken steps to curb the spread of cancer in asbestos workers, despite the mounting evidence that the disease is on a rapid rise.

"Sticklers for statistical niceties insisted they were unconvinced," he said, "and wanted even better proof."

For the past six years, Dr. Selikoff said, he has conducted an intense study of 632 asbestos insulation workers who are members of the New York and New Jersey locals of the Asbestos Workers Union.

The 632 men had been asbestos workers since 1942, Dr. Selikoff said. On the basis of normal life expectancy trends, 293 could have been expected to die by 1962. But instead, said Dr. Selikoff, 233 men died. Looking for the reason behind the extra 50 deaths, he said, it became evident "that cancers of several types" were responsible.

"We might have expected six or seven deaths due to lung cancer," he went on, "but there were 43. And while we would have expected nine or ten cancers of the stomach or colon, there were 29."

Dr. Selikoff explained that the "people who work in a dusty atmosphere not only breathe it in, they eat it, too."

Since 1962, he said, "the figures have been even worse.

"While we would have expected 90 men to have died in the past five years," Dr. Selikoff said, "there have been 113 deaths. While we would have expected three to have died of cancer of the lung or pleura, 28 have died of this disease."

Of equal concern, Dr. Selikoff went on, is a relatively new tumor related to asbestos exposure called mesothelioma, which is a cancer of the lining of the chest or peritoneum.

This is such a rare cancer, Dr. Selikoff said, that it is found to cause one out of every 10,000 deaths. But of the 113 deaths in the asbestos worker group in New York, he said, 13 have been from mesothelioma.

"This makes it one out of every 10 deaths among asbestos workers," he said, "instead of one out of 10,000."

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