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McGill Study Shows

Air Polluted By Asbestos

By FRED POLAND

Asbestos is among the air pollutants that plague Montrealers.

That asbestos is a significant air contaminant in Montreal is suggested by a study carried out by two disease experts at McGill University. However, they make it clear there is no evidence that this pollution causes any disease.

Dr. Lily Anjilvel, research fellow, and Dr. W. M. Thurlbeck, professor of pathology, report their findings in the Canadian Medical Association Journal.

They examined lung smears obtained at autopsies of 189 adult patients, selected at random, who had died in four Montreal hospitals — Royal Victoria, Montreal General, St. Mary's and Montreal Neurological.

Asbestos "bodies" were present in 48 out of the 189 autopsies. They were found in 22 of 55 men (39 per cent) and in 26 of 44 women (59 per cent). Men were more heavily contaminated. (Dr. Thurlbeck explained in an interview that these bodies are assumed to be particles of asbestos but for technical reasons this is not absolutely certain.)

No Association

"No particular association was noted between asbestos bodies in the lungs and the presence of cancer in the 22 patients in the series who had malignant disease," they re-

ported. (The rest suffered from other diseases.)

"The high incidence in this random series suggests that asbestos is a significant air contaminant in Montreal."

Since 26 of the 55 men were "retired — previous occupation unknown" and the women were generally designated in hospital records as housewives, data were not available to establish the relationship between occupation and the incidence of asbestos bodies.

In the whole series, age did not appear to affect the incidence of asbestos bodies. In men, there was an increase in incidence in the groups ranked according to age but in women the intermediate group — ages 45 to 65 — had the greatest incidence.

Authors find

The authors found lack of association with cancer interesting because on a worldwide scale the incidence of cancer is higher among asbestos workers than in the general population. But Canadian asbestos fibres may not cause cancer. A study in Canada in 1964 failed to show an increased incidence of cancer in asbestos workers.

The McGill study notes that asbestos is variously and extensively used in brake linings, electrical insulations, cement, and many household articles, so that a high percentage of the non-industrial population is exposed to the mineral.

At Theford Mines, Que., M. J. Messel, president of the Quebec Asbestos Mining Association, has announced formation of a fact-finding medical research organization to investigate the effects of asbestos on human health.

It is part of an international effort involving similar studies in Great Britain, the United States, Finland, the USSR, South Africa and Italy.

Mr. Messel said it has been known for some time that asbestos dust in high concentrations can be harmful to the lungs. But, he said, precautions now taken to protect workers in mines, mills and factories have reduced risks in those areas to a very low level.

The suggestion of a threat to health demands thorough examination, he said, because of the universal use of asbestos and asbestos products. National and international organizations are pressing for careful investigations so that if there are dangers they can be identified and controlled.