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Carcinogens (See N&N Dec.)

ASBESTOS ASSOCIATION CALLS HEW REPORT ON OCCUPATIONAL CANCER 'UNSUPPORTABLE'

In a letter to the Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, the asbestos industry charged that a federal report on occupational cancer was based on "scientifically unsupportable assumptions."

The Asbestos Information Association/North America sent HEW Secretary Joseph A. Califano, Jr., comments December 13 on the federal report, "Estimates of the Fraction of Cancer in the United States Related to Occupational Factors."

The "Estimates" paper released by Califano in a speech in September said previous estimates of the contribution to cancer incidence in the United States of occupational exposures were low and that the occupational factor probably was closer to 20 percent (Current Report, September 14, p. 459).

The posthearing record on the OSHA cancer policy closed December 19 following extensions of more than two months for receipt of additional comments. Work to prepare the unusually large record for certification by the administrative law judge was proceeding smoothly and was expected to take another week, hearing officer Tom Hall said January 2.

Overestimate Charged

The asbestos industry group, summarizing its criticisms, said the population at risk of dying from asbestos-caused cancer was "grossly overestimated" in the government report. The AIA accused the authors of ignoring "the likelihood that minimal, short-term exposures" to cancer-causing substances would carry far less risk for workers than sustained, long-term heavy exposures.

"The very important objective of protecting the health of employed persons will not be served either by underestimating or exaggerating the risks to which they are exposed," AIA President T. A. Dougherty wrote to Califano. A copy of the letter also was sent to the Labor Department where the Occupational Safety and Health Administration has included the "Estimates" paper in the record of a proposed carcinogens regulatory policy (Current Report, September 21, p. 517).

Contributors to the asbestos association's comments were William Weiss, professor of medicine at Hanneman Medical College in Philadelphia; Philip E. Enterline, professor of biostatistics at the University of Pittsburgh Graduate School of Public Health; and Hans Weill, professor of medicine at Tulane University School of Medicine. Comments also were included from Paul Kotin and Gerald R. Chase of the health, safety, and environment department of Johns-Manville Corporation.

Heavily Exposed Groups

According to Weill, the HEW estimates of relative risks for future cancer are based on workers who were heavily exposed in the past in jobs as insulators. "These same relative risks are being applied to working populations who have recently been exposed to far lower levels of asbestos dust, a procedure which ignores the demonstrated and uniformly agreed upon dose-relatedness of environmental carcinogenesis."

Weill said the experience of heavily exposed workers of the past was being projected onto a cohort of four million workers regarded as heavily exposed now but that this projection was not based on fact.

Weiss, of Hanneman, commented: "The 'fallacy' of 'one effect — one cause' explanations is developed by misdirected discussion." Weiss continued that the synergistic relationship of asbestos and smoking in causing lung cancer is well established. But lung cancer is rare in asbestos workers who do not smoke, he claimed, and thus smoking is the primary factor and asbestos an enhancing factor, Weiss concluded.

Weiss cited a study of Irish insulators presented at a recent New York Academy of Sciences conference. According to Weiss, the study concluded that smoking is the "important factor." The "survival curve" for the insulators who did smoke was similar to that of the general population, We reported.

Concerning the paper's estimates of cancer from arsenic exposure, Weiss declared that "the same sin is committed as in the estimate of asbestos risk." The high risk assigned part of a cohort of smelter workers who received 15 or more years' exposure to arsenic was applied to 1.5 million workers, he said. "Do all arsenic workers have the same risk as half the smelter workers? This question is not even considered by the authors," Weiss commented.

Other Overestimates Alleged

Enterline echoed the doubts of the other commenters over figures on workers who had received heavy asbestos exposure. He said the "Estimates" paper apparently applies "heavy exposure" to the type of exposure experienced by 17,800 insulation workers studied by Irving J. Selikoff at the Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York and referred to in the paper. Of the seven to 10 million workers alive today who are or were exposed to asbestos, four million were estimated in the paper to have received heavy exposure.

"I question whether there are 4,000,000 workers in the U.S. who have had that type of exposure," Enterline wrote. The University of Pittsburgh scientist also said the paper exaggerated the number of asbestos-related cancers.

Enterline differed with the conclusions on the risk-factor for lung cancer of workers exposed to hexavalent chromium. He said the "Estimates" paper relied on a study of workers refining chromite ore who had "an extraordinary risk." But assigning a five-fold lung cancer risk for 1.5 million workers from that evidence was in error, Enterline argued.

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