Introduction

Estimates of the prevalence of so-called "asbestos bodies" in the lungs of non-occupationally exposed adult inhabitants of large urban centers have risen from the original 30% found in Capetown, South Africa, and Miami, Florida, to 97% in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania,[1-7] by virtue of greater diligence in searching for these structures and also because of improvements in the method employed. However, even though the prevalence of these bodies in some urban centers may approach 100% of the lungs examined, it is important to bear in mind that in roughly 80% of the lungs, whatever the method employed, only one "asbestos body" was found; and that no increased prevalence of pulmonary fibrosis, lung cancer, or other pulmonary disease was associated with the presence of these bodies.

Thomson, who first discovered these "asbestos bodies" insisted that these structures were proof that urban populations were exposed to a significant asbestos dust hazard which could result in an increased prevalence of asbestotic pulmonary disease. He based his insistence on the assumption that the so-called "asbestos bodies" were a specific response to asbestos fibers. He also indicated that likely the most important source of asbestos fibers polluting the urban air was brake-drum dust from automobiles.[8]

Recently, work in this laboratory has established that the so-called "asbestos body" is a non-specific structure that may be formed in response to a number of different fibrous dusts.[9] The generic term of ferruginous body