

CANCER DEBATE

Continued From Page One
adequately for evaluating the possible occurrence of occupationally related cancers. Because of the insensitivity of epidemiologic surveys and various difficulties in conducting them, only agents and industrial processes which lead to rather large excesses have been identified to date."

One problem in picking up on occupationally related cancers lies in the fact that such cancers usually have a long latent period — anywhere from 10 to 50 years can elapse between exposure to a cancer-causing chemical and the first signs of the disease, researchers say.

In addition, American workers tend to change jobs frequently, making it difficult to monitor a group over a prolonged period of time. Finally, it's often difficult for doctors to pinpoint cancer to a single cause. The authors of this report contend that "It is likely that many, if not most, cancers are influenced by two or more external factors . . ."

The report notes that "many of the cancers considered here as attributable to occupational exposure would simultaneously be attributable to other factors, especially smoking."

One of the most carefully scrutinized hazards is asbestos. The government scientists note that the consequences of exposure to asbestos in the U.S. "have only begun to be recognized in the recent past." They estimate that eight to 11 million workers have been exposed to asbestos in the U.S. since the beginning of World War II. About four million of those workers were heavily exposed, the scientists estimate. Of that group, the report predicts that at least 1.6 million are expected to die of asbestos-related cancers.

The researchers note that little is known about several other diseases which appear to be occupationally related.

For example, coal miners have a 40

percent higher incidence of stomach cancer than the population at large, studies have shown. At present, no researchers have determined why.

"We've been pushing for research (by the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health) on this since the first study came out in 1977, because we just don't know the cause," said Kerr. "Some people believe it might be related to coal miners breathing in coal dust, coughing up the larger particles and then swallowing them. Whether this has any effect, we're not sure. It is something that has to be researched."

The report also notes that newspaper printing pressmen have a 125 percent higher rate of mouth and pharynx cancer than the population at large. Ron Harris, pressroom manager for Charleston Newspapers, said he was unaware of that statistic.

"I've never heard about that, but years ago I remember we had a man here who had a cancer in his mouth, but I don't think it was related to his job," he said. "I'm 31 years in the trade and I haven't had any ill-effects," he added.