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Asbestos recognised as cancer risk

By Dr Alfred Byrne

REGULATIONS which acknowledge that occupational exposure to asbestos is causing the most important industrial cancer of our time will be introduced next week by Miss Margaret Herbison, Minister of Social Security.

From August 22 the tumour known as mesothelioma will be scheduled as a "prescribed disease," so that asbestos workers who contract it as a result of their occupation after a certain date will be eligible for industrial benefit. Mesothelioma is an unusual tumour of the pleura—covering the lung—and of similar tissue lining the abdominal cavity, and is invariably fatal. Several steps are being taken towards discovering the full effects of this recently-recognised disease so that measures to prevent it can be devised.

A register of all past and present cases occurring in Britain has been set up by the Medical Research Council's Pneumoconiosis Research Unit, directed by Dr. J. C. Gilson, in Cardiff. They have added 70 new cases to their original nucleus of 120 since the Sunday Times broke the news of this epidemic on October 21, 1965. One hospital in London and another in Belfast are each admitting an average of one new case a month.

An average of 40 years usually elapses between exposure to asbestos and the appearance of the growth. Exposure for only two or three months may cause the cancer. Living near an asbestos works predisposes to mesothelioma, and relatives of asbestos workers can also get it through inhaling asbestos fibres given off the clothing of their menfolk.

Such patients were not working with asbestos, so they will not be eligible for compensation under the Industrial Injuries Act of 1947. Incredibly, perhaps, there are also other mesothelioma victims who are not eligible under the new regulation because they worked for a short time in the industry only before the new Act came into force.

There are three types of asbestos used commercially—chrysotile, crocidolite and amosite—whose possible hazards are now being assessed in the laboratory and the field. With [illegible] as chairman, the International Union Against Cancer is arranging [illegible] mesothelioma surveys in areas where only one type of fibre is [illegible]. Studies in South Africa have already shown that the disease is more common in the neighbourhood of mines producing crocidolite than amosite. To complete the picture the committee are anxious to see a similar study performed in Canada in relation to mines producing chrysotile.

Pathologists in British hospitals are also going back through their records to see if mesothelioma is a "new" disease associated with the commercial use of asbestos, and checking if it is peculiarly related to certain districts. They are also studying the incidence of asbestos particles in lungs examined post mortem. In cities of the U.S, South Africa and Britain the lungs of middle-aged and older people have been found to contain asbestos bodies in from 5 to 30 per cent. of cases. But the medical significance of this, if any, remains to be decided.

Advised by a committee of experts, the Ministry of Labour is drawing up a new code of regulations designed to give persons working with asbestos more protection than they have had from the general factory regulations. Asbestos is now used to make gutters, roofing, tiles, brake-linings and numerous other things not envisaged when the risk of asbestosis was first realised.

The official proposals will therefore include several occupations to which not enough thought is given at present. Permissible standards of dustiness will presumably be proposed for workers exposed to special risk, such as those in the textile industry and [illegible] It is hoped that the first official proposals will be made known by the end of this [illegible]