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TALC TESTS WANTING, FDA EXPERTS ADMIT

Washington-Baby powders that are found to contain asbestos should not be allowed on the market, the Food & Drug Administration's top cosmetic expert said yesterday.

However, H. Eiermann, Director of the FDA's division of cosmetic technology, said the government so far has found no evidence that some baby and bath powders are contaminated with the cancer-causing mineral. Researchers at New York Mt. Sinai Hospital have reported finding asbestos in concentrations ranging from 2-20% in 10 of the 20 baby powder samples that they have tested.

The FDA and the Mt. Sinai researchers used different methods to identify asbestos in talc, the main ingredient in most powders, Eiermann said, and there is considerable disagreement in scientific circles about how best to analyze the complex minerals. Nevertheless, he said, the FDA has agreed to test the Mt. Sinai samples and to compare its results with those obtained by the New York scientists.

Eiermann also said the Mt. Sinai tests, which were conducted on powders purchased in 1973, may not accurately reflect the composition of the powders on the market today. Many manufacturers, he said, recently have become concerned about the asbestos content of their product, and have switched to talc supplies which are relatively free of asbestos contamination.

SAYS HANDS ARE TIED

Nevertheless, said Eiermann, the FDA lacks the legal authority, the manpower, and the money to adequately protect the public for potentially hazardous cosmetics ranging from hair dyes to contaminated mascara.

Every cosmetic that goes on the market should be test," he said. The law today merely prevents manufacturers from introducing adulterated or mis-branded products. "The entire cosmetics budget, is only 2-1/2 million, and we have only 8 chemists. There are 250,000 different cosmetic products on the market and 4000-5000 manufacturers. We have 1% of the total FDA budget."

Eiermann made his comments at a 2-1/2 hour meeting yesterday with Rep. Andrew Maguire, D-NJ. Maguire, concerned about published reports of asbestos contamination in baby powders, walked in on Eiermann unannounced after lunch, with his staff health expert, his press secretary, two house investigation sub-committee staffers, and a reporter in tow.

Maguire asked Eiermann to produce his files on baby powders and to explain what the FDA has been doing about the reports of contamination.

At one point, Maguire asked whether the FDA considers any level of asbestos in powders, no matter how low, to be safe. Eiermann replied that no safe exposure to asbestos had been found, and later said that talc which is found to contain asbestos should not be used to make baby or body powder.

CALLS TESTING DIFFICULT

He said, however, that sophisticated and time-consuming techniques that are need to find asbestos fibers can test only minute amounts of talc. Because talc and asbestos often are mixed together in infinitely variable concentrations, tests on such small samples do not accurately reflect asbestos levels in larger samples of talc, he told Maguire.

The FDA, Eiermann said, wants a new law tightening government control on all cosmetics. The agency, he said, supports a bill sponsored by Senator Thomas Eagleton, D-Mo., which would require cosmetic manufacturers to safely test their products and to submit the test results to the FDA for approval before the products could be sold.

A FDA study conducted last year indicates that cosmetics may be responsible for as many as 140,000 injuries to American consumers each year, ranging from minor skin irritations to prolonged medical problems requiring professional attention. Testimony before the Senate has placed the number of cosmetic related injuries anywhere from 29,000 to 60,000 per year.

Eiermann said the FDA now is studying, among other things, hair dyes, antiperspirants, and mascara for evidence of danger. For example, he said, there is some evidence that mascara can become contaminated from contact with the skin and may cause ulcers on the cornea, the transparent cover over the lens of the eye. If the brush used to apply mascara accidentally scratches the cornea, he said, it can deposit germs which can cause corneal ulcers, which can lead to blindness. The FDA, said Eiermann, is studying the use of preservatives in mascara to prevent the spread of such germs, and may issue regulations on the composition of mascara.

There is no evidence, on the other hand, that baby powder is a potential health hazard, Eiermann said. Johnson & Johnson in New Brunswick, the nation's leading manufacturer of baby powders, has tested its talc on hamsters and has found no evidence that talc inhaled into the lungs is hazardous, he said.

When questioned, however, Eiermann acknowledged that Johnson & Johnson talc, which comes from the company's own mines in Vermont, has been found to be virtually free of asbestos. No tests have been conducted on animals using talc from New York State, which is used in some powders and which generally contains more asbestos than Vermont talc. The FDA, he said, has no plans for such tests.

"Let me go to the housewife in my district," Maguire replied. "She goes into the store and she sees 9 types of talc lined up on the shelves. How is she to know which ones are safe?"

"We cannot test every sample," Eiermann replied.

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