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ASBESTOS RULINGS HELD INADEQUATE

Cancer Authority Says Many
Workers Face Death

By FELIX BELAIR Jr.

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, June 12—An authority on asbestos-caused cancer said today that tens of thousands of workers exposed to asbestos would die because of inadequate regulations issued recently by the Government's Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

The prediction was made by Dr. Irving Selikoff, of Mount Sinai Hospital in New York, in a report to a meeting of the industrial union department of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations at the organization's headquarters here.

Dr. Selikoff said that, if the Federal agency showed the same disregard for essential safeguards and precautions in setting standards for other toxic substances as it demonstrated in the asbestos regulations, "we face an unparalleled disaster to the working people in our country."

"The regulations speak blandly of five fibers per milliliter [as] 'standard' but neglect to add that a working man inhales from four to eight million milliliters in an eight-hour day," he said. A milliliter, or cubic centimeter, holds about a thimbleful of air.

In a direct reference to Assistant Secretary of Labor George C. Guenther, who heads the safety agency, Dr. Selikoff said, "Mr. Guenther orders that workers exposed to asbestos in any trade are required to work under conditions which permit them to inhale 20 million or even 30 million fibers in a working day."

Mr. Guenther made this statement after hearing of the doctor's charges: "Dr. Selikoff has chosen to overdramatize the matter. There is no question that exposure to asbestos is most hazardous."

"We believe," he said, "that the new standards will provide substantial and real protection for exposed workers and that they provide for reductions in levels of asbestos exposure that are reasonable and, in our judgment, based on tests from many quarters."

Precautions Seen Ignored

Dr. Selikoff, who has long been engaged in research on the cancer-producing effects of asbestos and the incidence of cancer of the lungs, abdomen and colon, said, "Almost every essential precaution that could have been taken has been ignored or discarded, in many instances against the recommendations given to the Department of Labor by the Public Health Service's National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health [a branch of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare] or by its own advisory committee on asbestos dust."

The asbestos standard issued by the Labor Department agency last week provided for an exposure limit of 2 fibers per cubic centimeter of air but said the present emergency standard of 5 fibers would continue until July, 1976. It also provided a maximum exposure limit of 10 fibers per cubic centimeter for an eight-hour day. The institute had recommended a maximum daily exposure of 5 fibers.

72 Deaths From Cancer

Dr. Selikoff cited a study of 689 asbestos production and textile workers from January 1, 1959, to December 31, 1971. He said that it showed 72 deaths from all types of cancer compared with an "expected rate" of 27.8 for the population as a whole. From cancer of the lungs, pleura, trachea and bronchus, there were 35 deaths, compared with an expected rate of 8.4 for the population generally.

In addition to the 72 cancer deaths, there were 24 fatalities traceable to scarring of the lung. This malady is found only among asbestos workers. There are now about 500,000 Americans currently or previously employed on regular asbestos work.

"If our experiences of the past several years are a guide, 100,000 will die of lung cancer, 35,000 of abdominal or chest cancer known as mesothelioma and 35,000 of asbestosis [scarring of the lung] as well as many thousands more of other cancers, such as those of the colon, rectum and stomach, Dr. Selikoff said.