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Doctors Say Working With Asbestos May Cause Cancer After Many Years

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Of The Bulletin Staff

Asbestos, one of industry's most important and widely used raw materials, was placed under additional suspicion here yesterday as a possible cause of cancer.

Here is some of the evidence that was presented by a New York physician, Dr. I. J. Selikoff, to a meeting of the American Industrial Hygiene Association in the Sheraton Hotel.

Dr. Selikoff's medical research team has studied all of the men who have become members of the New York City-Newark, N. J. locals of the International Union of Heat and Frost Insulators and Asbestos Workers, AFL-CIO, since Dec. 31, 1942. They are building trades workers.

Research Report

At the end of a 20-year period, as of Dec. 31, 1962, reported Dr. Selikoff, the researchers noted the following:

—They selected records of 632 men who had been exposed to asbestos for 20 years. On the basis of general population mortality statistics, 203 should have died. However, the actual death rate in the group was 255. The difference was almost entirely attributable to death from cancer.

—In this group there should have been, according to general averages, between six and seven deaths because of cancer in the lungs or the pleura, a sac surrounding the lungs. Actually, there were 45 such cancer victims. They would have expected less than ten cancers of the colon and rectum, but there were 29.

—Bronchiogenic carcinoma was responsible for almost one out of every five deaths, an incidence seven times that expected in the general population.

Cancers in Hamsters

Dr. Selikoff pointed out that Dr. William E. Smith of the Health Research Institute of Fairleigh Dickinson University recently had reported creating cancers in hamsters by injecting asbestos into the lining around their lungs.

He said that the hazard of malignant diseases of the lungs of asbestos workers engaged in specific industrial operations such as mining and asbestos processing had been reported 30 years ago.

The New York area building trades workers, however, was "a group with relatively little asbestos exposure," said Dr. Selikoff.

So formidable were the implications of this study, said Dr. Selikoff, that all of the buildings trades workers in the United States and workers in selected other industries should be subjected to the widest possible study, so that this and some other materials under suspicion could be proven or laid to rest.

3,000 Products

He said he estimated there were about three million building trades workers in the nation. In addition, he said, there are about 3,000 asbestos products, from pipe insulation to auto brake linings to floor tile, with an undetermined number of workers.

"I doubt that modern industry could survive without asbestos. World production has grown from 30,000 tons in 1900 to more than three million tons in 1960," said Dr. Selikoff.

Working with Dr. Selikoff are Dr. Jacob Churg and Dr. E. Cuyler Hammond, all of Mt. Sinai Hospital in New York. Dr. Hammond also is director of statistics for the American Cancer Society. It was his report of more than 420,000 smokers and non-smokers last December that produced a major indictment of cigaret smoking as a health hazard.

Microscopic Fibers

Asbestos is a mineral, a class of rocks that have different chemical compositions but share the property of being made by nature in the form of tightly packed fibers. Pulverized asbestos fibers can be of microscopic size.

Dr. Selikoff reported that of the lung cancer victims studied in New York, all had been exposed to asbestos at least 22 years. This, he said, indicated that if their cancers were related to the asbestos, then it was a very slowly developing disease.

The exposure of these workers in building trades, he said, would be greater than that of the general population, but how much greater it was would be hard to say without considerably more research.

He did note that a researcher working in South Africa had studied the lungs of a large group of people there and found 25 percent to contain asbestos particles in small amounts.

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