

Asbestos risk inflated, latest study concludes

By Rebecca Kolberg

United Press International

WASHINGTON — Asbestos found in schools and other public buildings poses little risk for lung disease, and "asbestos panic" may be leading to costly and unnecessary removal efforts, scientists said Thursday.

In a study published in the journal *Science*, a team of medical experts concluded, "Chrysotile asbestos, the type of fiber found predominantly in U.S. schools and buildings, is not a health risk in the non-occupational environment."

"Clearly, the asbestos panic in the United States must be curtailed, especially because unwarranted poorly controlled asbestos abatement results in unnecessary risks to young removal workers who may develop asbestos-related cancers in later decades," they wrote.

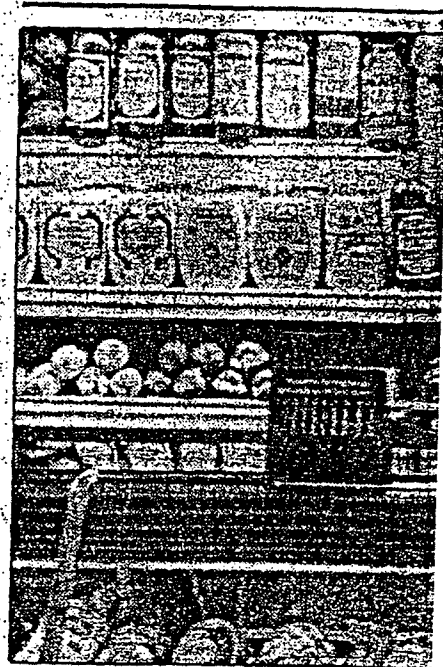
Dr. B.T. Mossman of the University of Vermont Medical School and his colleagues said they based their assessment on a review of the latest scientific data on asbestos. The study did not receive funding from the asbestos industry, they said.

Asbestos, a fibrous mineral used for insulation and fireproofing, becomes hazardous when it crumbles and its fibers are inhaled. Exposure to asbestos can cause lung cancer and other respiratory diseases.

The Environmental Protection Agency estimates up to 12,000 Americans die of asbestos-related cancer annually, with most cases related to on-the-job exposure.

The EPA requires schools to be inspected for crumbling or "friable" asbestos. Last summer it imposed a total ban on the use of asbestos that

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will be phased in over seven years.

Mossman's team argues EPA actions have failed to take into account studies that indicate different forms of asbestos may have differing power to cause disease. The scientists said most lung diseases appear linked to a type of asbestos called amphibole, which flakes off in rod-like fibers, rather than a type called chrysotile, which produces curly particles that they said appear less likely to penetrate the lungs.

Dr. Bernard Gee, co-author of the study and a Yale medical professor, said: "Nine times out of 10, the asbestos you find in America is the benign (harmless) form."

The study noted the chance a child exposed to asbestos for five years will eventually die of asbestos-related disease is at least 300 times less than his risk of drowning or being hit by a car before age 14.

Charles Elkins, director of the EPA's Office of Toxic Substances, said: "We agree people should not

panic if asbestos is found, but on the other hand to write it off as an insignificant risk is misleading, because the risks are there."

Elkins said some research has hinted at differences in cancer-causing potential among various types of asbestos. But the EPA official said no study has proven any type to be totally harmless, so "we consider them all hazardous."

Gee and his colleagues contend asbestos should not be ripped out or covered up simply because it is crumbling; but tests should be conducted to see what type it is and if it is entering the air. Presently, the EPA relies mainly on visual inspections of asbestos to determine if it is a problem, Gee said.

The cost of removing asbestos from the estimated 730,000 public and commercial buildings containing it ranges from \$50 billion to \$150 billion, the scientists said.

Some people have argued that basing asbestos actions on air tests rather than visual checks would take too much work. But Gee said he thinks it is more foolish to spend time and money containing asbestos

that does not threaten health.

Robert Percival, a professor of environmental law at the University of Maryland, said the *Science* article contains "the same old arguments that have been made by a lot of the asbestos industries for a long time."

When the EPA drew up its asbestos policy, government experts concluded scientific evidence was not strong enough to back up claims that one form of asbestos is safer than another, he said.

Percival also said air tests for asbestos are unreliable.

The problem with air monitoring is that you can come up with a reading that makes you think the area is safe, and two minutes later, in the same place, you can get a wildly different reading," he said.

Percival conceded there have been instances in which risk of asbestos exposure has been overblown.

But he added asbestos remains a serious threat because no one has found a safe exposure level, and "all asbestos becomes a health hazard at some point because it all eventually deteriorates."

meeting between the mayor and an

on his schedule at the hotel Thursday night.