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BC Notes: J&J men received Washington Post story on 1973 US Senate hearing where talc was discussed by Selikoff and Castleman

Barry Castleman Comments - J&J men received Washington Post story on 1973 US Senate hearing where talc was discussed by Selikoff and Castleman

FROM THE DESK OF
W. H. ASHTON

THE WASHINGTON POST

Saturday, Feb. 24, 1973

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Asbestos Hazards Found Widespread

By George Lardner Jr.
Washington Post Staff Writer

If the martinis don't get at Mount Sinai Hospital of you, the sugar in your coffee various causes.

Both could easily send traces of asbestos into your system, the Senate Subcommittee on the Environment was told yesterday at a hearing on the pervasiveness of the highly toxic substance in modern society.

By now reported Dr. Irving Selikoff, the leading medical authority in the field, Americans are "all contaminated with asbestos." The number of fibers in our bodies may be small, he said, but no one knows just how many may be ingested before cancer sets in.

The stuff, according to Dr. Selikoff and the witnesses who followed him, can be found almost everywhere: in gin and sugar, rice pudding and chewing gum, children's balloons and papier mache.

"We have yet to see a sample of air in an American city without asbestos in it," Dr. Selikoff added. Without enactment of effective government controls, he said, "I don't think we can safely live with asbestos."

Its dangers have been most commonly associated with occupational diseases such as asbestosis and cancers stemming from steady exposure to asbestos dust. Once in the body, Dr. Selikoff said, it stays there, interacting with other cancer-causing agents and multiplying the hazards. Asbestos workers who smoke develop lung cancer eight times as often as other smokers, he said, and one of every five asbestos workers dies from it.

The mineral, however, is also used in "several thousand products," said Arthur M. Langer, an associate of Dr. Selikoff at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York City. It is inadvertently added to many others, such as liquor and medicines, he said, because of its use as a filtering agent.

Even many of the hospital's medicines have been contaminated as a result of the asbestos in the filters often used by drug manufacturers, Dr. Selikoff said. He said he quietly notified the Food and Drug Administration of this in 1968 because "we didn't think it wise to have this splashed all over the media." But "nothing very much happened," he said.

In fact, Dr. Selikoff told a reporter after the hearing, "as of this week, we are still finding asbestos in about one third of all the drugs at Mount Sinai Hospital," roughly the same proportion found when FDA officials were first notified five years ago.

Another witness, Barry Castleman, an environmental engineer with the Baltimore County Health Department, said asbestos fibers were found last September in a preliminary analysis of beer from the Carling Brewery and gin from the Calvert Distillery, both in Baltimore County.

Testifying for the Washington-based Center for Science in the Public Interest, Castleman said Carling and all other breweries in the Baltimore area had converted their filters to a cellulose substitute.

"Calvert officials, on the other hand," he said, "maintain that it would cost millions of dollars to stop using asbestos at this time, and they know of no suitable substitutes for clarifying gin."

Castleman, who placed a pint of Calvert gin amid other exhibits on the witness table, said later that he assumed other gin-makers use the same kind of filters, mainly to produce "very clear gin—for cosmetic purposes."

He also told the subcommittee that 80 per cent of the metropolitan water supply of Maryland's Harford County is carried in asbestos cement pipe. Water samples are now

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Sen. John V. Tunney (D-Calif.), acting subcommittee chairman, asked whether his children should stop blowing up balloons—whose powdery insides signify the presence of asbestos fibers. And should he quit using his after-shave talcum powder?

"Yes, it does mean that," Dr. Selikoff replied, emphasizing that the ills from asbestos don't show up for 20 to 30 years. "Anything that has asbestos in it, keep it away from your kids."

Langer said his laboratory at Mount Sinai, described as one of two in the world capable of analyzing microparticles in human tissue, has found bits of asbestos in the bodies of more than 100 patients who died consecutively

being tested to see if any asbestos is present, he said.

"You can leave the gin here," Tunney told him with a nod at the pint-sized exhibit.

"You can have it," the witness replied.