FILE NAME: Newspaper & Magazine Articles (NMA)

DATE: 1972 June 17

DOC#: NMA066

DOCUMENT DESCRIPTION: NYT - Talc Warning is Labeled False

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New York Times (1857-Current file); Jun 17, 1972, ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 20
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Talc Warning Is Labeled False

By GRACE LICHTENSTEIN

The medical researcher who did tests on asbestos in baby powder for the city's Environmental Protection Administration charged yesterday that the agency had misinterpreted his analyses and published false data.

The researcher, Dr. Arthur M. Langer of the Mount Sinai School of Medicine, said it was "absolutely untrue" that samples of Johnson & Johnson and Landers baby powders tested in a preliminary study contained from 5 to 25 per cent asbestos fibers, as reported by the city office.

On the contrary, Dr. Langer said, further, more-detailed analysis found that there were only "trace" amounts of asbestos in Johnson & Johnson powder. "Of all the talcs we've looked at, Johnson & Johnson is the most pure," he said.

'No Detectable' Asbestos

Jerome Kretchmer, the Environmental Protection Administrator, who brought up the alleged danger of asbestos in talc a year ago, said yesterday, "I concede the tests results have changed." But he suggested that the talc manufacturers might have removed the asbestos from the products in the months since the issue was first raised. He said he had no evidence, however, to prove that the formulations had been changed.

Meanwhile, a spokesman for the Food and Drug Administration in Washington said yesterday that results from tests made in March showed "no detectable content of asbestos" in Johnson & Johnson baby powder, and only "minor" amounts — about 1 per cent — in the Landers product.

The city's environmental agency had warned parents not to use baby powder, especially on infants, until the asbestos question was cleared up, since asbestos is known to cause lung cancer years after being inhaled.

Kretchmer Cites Letter

But Dr. Robert M. Schaffner, director of the Office of Product Technology for the F.D.A., said that out of 40 talcum samples recently tested by the Federal agency, 39 contained only 1 per cent or less of asbestos. One sample is being re-tested.

Dr. Schaffner said that in light of this research, "we would not agree with the warning on talc."

Mr. Kretchmer said his agency had heard of the new test results only after the Environmental Protection Administration released a letter from James R. Marshall, director of public information, to a consumer. In the letter Mr. Marshall named Johnson & Johnson and Landers as being the two brands in which the E.P.A. had found 5 to 25 per cent asbestos more than a year ago. The letter was dated June 8.

Mr. Marshall said yesterday he had not known about Dr. Langer's later analyses absolving Johnson & Johnson, when he wrote the letter. But he contended that Dr. Langer's original report to the E.P.A. on May 10, 1971, had clearly warned about possible danger in using baby powder.

The report said in part:

"The amounts of fiber present in these samples, as determined by light microscopy, ranges from 5 to 25 per cent . . . Please note that these results are preliminary in nature and that some further investigations are warranted to delineate whether or not a health hazard exists with these materials . . . It is of interest to note that some recent observations do suggest a hazard exists. Substitute materials should be considered until the problem is clarified."

Dr. Langer said yesterday that with light microscopy "you see only the gross fibers." He said that what he thought to be mineral fibers turned out in later research to be talc itself.

Harold Romer, consultant to the Commissioner of Air Resources, said Dr. Langer had spoken to him about the new findings but that he was led to believe that there was a difference of perhaps 1 per cent, rather than a drop to "trace" amounts.

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