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A RARE CARCINOMA BELIEVED ON RISE

Study of Asbestos Workers Shows a High Incidence

By HAROLD M. SCHMECK Jr.

Occupational exposure to asbestos may be making an extremely rare form of cancer much more common, according to a report yesterday to the annual meeting of the American Public Health Association.

The cancer is called mesothelioma. It affects the inner lining of the abdomen or of the chest and, in either case, it is fatal. In the general population it is extremely rare, but studies in Africa, where asbestos is mined, and more recent studies of construction workers exposed to asbestos dust in the New York City area show it to be far more common among those exposed occupationally.

The specialists who gave the report expressed worry that the danger might not be entirely restricted to a limited occupation group, but that it might be more general and possibly of considerable importance. There is no direct evidence to substantiate this, they said, but some of the available findings hint that this may be the case.

The report was given by Dr. Irving J. Selikoff and Dr. Jacob Churg of Mount Sinai Hospital and Dr. E. Cuyler Hammond, director of statistical research for the American Cancer Society.



The New York Times
Dr. E. Cuyler Hammond

Mesothelioma is so rare in the general population that it is not separately coded among causes of death. Yet a study four years ago in an African asbestos mining region found 33 cases, the report said.

Heavy exposure to asbestos dust has in the past been linked with some increased risk of lung cancer, Dr. Selikoff and Dr. Hammond said at a news conference before their talk, but the mesothelioma is another matter.

The group pursued the question by studies in the United States. One of these was a study of deaths among members of two New York area locals of a construction trade union whose members dealth with asbestos insulation. Of a total of 307 deaths occurring in this fairly restricted group over 20 years—1943 to 1964—10 were found to be caused by mesothelioma.

The report called this "an extraordinarily high incidence for a tumor generally so rare." In contrast, they current hugh study by the American Cancer Society on the effects of environmental factors on health showed that among 31,652 deaths in the general population only three were due to mesothelioma.

A further study of many cases of mesothelioma collected over a long period by the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology showed that one-fourth of those specimens that could be tested had evidence of the presence of asbestos.

The worrisome feature, Dr. Hammond and Dr. Selikoff said, is the evidence that asbestos, once taken into the body, stays there. Thus even a single heavy exposure could conceivably produce a cancer after a latent period of 20 years or more, they said.

This idea, for which they said there is some experimental as well as epidemiological evidence, could expand the risk from simply those occupationally exposed to virtually anyone who might only occasionally encounter asbestos dust.

The severity of exposure necessary to produce such a serious effect is not known, the two physicians said.