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Risk of One Type of Asbestos Discounted

Health Experts Say Billions May Be Wasted by Removing Banned Insulation Material

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The most common type of asbestos in schools and other buildings poses little health risk, which means billions of dollars may be wasted by removing the now-banned insulation material, according to a report published today by experts on asbestos-related disease.

The scientists, who reviewed recent studies on dangers of asbestos, contend that misguided legislation and inadequate scientific studies have instilled an "asbestos panic" in parents who fear their children will develop cancer and lung diseases because of high levels of airborne asbestos in schools. The researchers add that such popular concepts as the "one-fiber theory" have led people to fear that a single fiber of inhaled asbestos will cause cancer. These assumptions are incorrect, according to the researchers.

"Clearly, the asbestos panic in the U.S. must be curtailed, especially because unwarranted and poorly-controlled asbestos abate-

ment results in unnecessary risks to young removal workers who may develop asbestos-related cancers in later decades," according to B. T. Mossman of the College of Medicine at the University of Vermont, who wrote the report with four colleagues in today's issue of the journal Science.

As mandated by the Asbestos Hazard Management Act of 1986, the Environmental Protection Agency requires school administrators to look for asbestos in school buildings and submit plans for removing or containing the asbestos. Schools are not required to remove the material, however, unless it comes into direct contact with schoolchildren. In most cases, the asbestos is not removed, but contained.

"We would never recommend that people panic," said Charles Elkins, director of the office of toxic substances at EPA. "But ignoring it is not recommended, either."

EPA officials yesterday said the law affects about 100,000 school buildings, of which 35,000 harbor

what is called "friable asbestos," meaning the insulation crumbles when disturbed. The inspection and management of asbestos in schools will cost \$3 billion to \$5 billion over the next 30 years, according to Elkins.

There has been pressure in Congress to extend EPA requirements to all public and commercial buildings in the United States, a step which would affect an estimated 733,000 buildings and could cost as much as \$150 billion. The EPA already requires that all commercial and public buildings that are to be renovated or torn down must first remove asbestos.

However, Mossman and co-workers say the type of asbestos is important in determining the health risk. There are two basic types of asbestos: amphibole fibers, which are rod-shaped and more likely to penetrate the lung, and chrysotile fibers, which are curly and usually occur in bundles, and so are more likely to be filtered out by a person's air passages.

The most common form of asbes-

tos in schools and other buildings is the curly chrysotile fibers. According to Mossman, who reviewed studies on asbestos-related disease, this type "is not a health risk in the non-occupational environment."

EPA officials said yesterday that "there are some studies that give a hint that some of these fiber types are less likely to cause cancer," but that given the scientific uncertainties, "we treat them as of equal concern." The EPA does not require schools to identify what type of asbestos they harbor. Doing the proper identification of asbestos type requires sophisticated laboratory techniques involving X-rays and electron microscopes.

The scientists calculated that the non-occupational risk of death from asbestos exposure is many times lower than that from smoking, playing high school football or receiving whooping cough vaccinations. They say that if society wants to take large steps to reduce lung disease, it should work toward preventing smoking instead of removing asbes-