A case-control study of lung cancer in a cohort of workers potentially exposed to slag wool fibres

Sir,—The conclusion reached by Wong et al (1991;48:815–24) that exposure to slag wool fibre did not increase lung cancer risk among a cohort of slag wool workers is supported by results from experimental studies.

For example, no evidence of lung disease related to fibre inhalation was found in hamsters or rats exposed to slag wool fibres in concentrations hundreds of times greater than those found in the workplace.1 In this study animals exposed to crocidolite did develop lung tumours and statistically significant fibrosis. Also, implantation or injection of slag wool fibres in concentrations thousands of times greater than those found in the workplace into the chest or abdominal cavities of rats did not induce significant numbers of tumours.2,3

Results from inhalation studies designed to assess biopersistence of fibres in rat lungs suggested that slag wool fibres are attacked by fluids present in the lungs.4,5 Slag wool fibres disintegrated and were cleared from the lungs more rapidly than were more durable fibres. These results are consistent with those from analyses of lung tissue samples from deceased slag wool workers.6 No slag wool fibres were seen in these samples. Perhaps slag wool fibres of dimension classically associated with tumour induction (“Stanton fibres”) do not stay in the lung in sufficient quantity or time to induce tumours. Currently TIMA Inc is sponsoring animal inhalation studies at RCC Laboratories in Switzerland to further evaluate the biopersistence of slag wool fibres and other manmade vitreous fibres.

In conclusion, the results reported by Wong et al (1991) emphasises the importance of cigarette smoking and detailed exposure assessment data in the analysis and interpretation of occupational epidemiological studies. Although some previous cohort mortality studies suggested a modest increase of lung cancer in workers exposed to slag wool fibres, these studies were inconclusive for a number of reasons.6,7 The most serious limitations were lack of control for cigarette smoking and the presence of confounders in some of the workplaces studied. Using a case-control study design, Wong et al were able to consider these limitations. The next updates of the cohort mortality studies are to include case-control studies of design similar to that of Wong et al. These updates are scheduled for completion in early 1994.

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