

Silicosis Threat Grows

Wyoming bentonite plant workers are being made invalids and dying in early manhood because of silicosis contracted in several bentonite plants, a Casper physician charged Thursday.

Dr. Prendan Phibbs said the silicosis results from breathing air in which there is a dangerous level of silica dust, which, he claims, can easily be controlled.

"This is a disease that should never occur in modern industry," Phibbs said, "because simple ventilation and good industrial housekeeping will prevent it."

Phibbs said that reports by the State Health Dept. showing a dangerous level of silica dust in bentonite plants are a matter of record as far back as 1950. And the problem appears to be getting worse.

"A survey last month of 30 men in one plant showed four cases of advanced silica tuberculosis confirmed by the lung section of the University of Colorado medical school," Phibbs said.

He added that another study taken last year showed 20 percent of a work force of 50 men have some degree of silicosis, from mild to almost fatal.

There is no treatment for silicosis, Phibbs said. It occurs when silica forms an acid in the lungs which eats the tissue and creates chronic inflammation.

Phibbs said that the Wyoming Medical Association recommends that the State Dept. of Health be given the authority to set standards for safety for silica and other industrial poisons and toxins. Wyoming is the only state where the State Dept. of Health does not have this authority, he said.

"The Health Dept. should have the authority to inspect and to detect industrial health hazards, and machinery should be organized in the state government for endorsement of an industrial health code," Phibbs noted.

He added that the Wyoming Medical Association is proposing legislation to permit the State Health Dept. to act effectively in this field — "the same authority health departments have everywhere in the United States."

"If adequate legislation is not enacted in this session, the federal Labor Dept. and the U.S. Public Health Service will assume this function for Wyoming industry within the next 18 months, according to legislation now being studied," Phibbs said.

Silicosis Threat to Bentonite Workers

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