

Identifying Mesotheliomas on Death Certificates

I have read with interest the article by Dr. Lilienfeld and Dr. Gunderson in *Public Health Reports* (July-August 1986, pages 395-399), "The 'Missing cases' of pleural malignant mesothelioma in Minnesota, 1979-81: Preliminary report." I agree it is important that cancer researchers and epidemiologists be able to identify mesotheliomas from death certificates not only of the pleura reported in this paper, but also of the peritoneum so that past exposure to asbestos can be identified.

The authors point out that death certificates are difficult to use to estimate the mortality from mesothelioma. They were fortunate to be able to actually review death certificates to see the wording; most researchers must rely on published statistics of which there are none for mesothelioma. The closest category in the International Classification of Diseases, Ninth Revision (ICD-9) is 163. (malignant neoplasm of pleura) which may include other histologic types besides mesotheliomas. Indexing of mesothelioma, unspecified as to site is categorized in ICD-9 to 199.1. This category, which is for all unknown primary sites, is usually so large that most researchers could not possibly review all 199.1 deaths to find "mesotheliomas," even if the certificates were available. Therefore at present I consider it practically impossible to identify mesotheliomas on death certificates.

In view of the authors' suggestion in their last paragraph, I thought it would be of interest to your readers to know that the World Health Organization (WHO) is planning to add the category "Malignant neoplasm of mesothelial tissue (mesothelioma)" with

subdivisions of pleura, peritoneum, other specified sites and mesothelioma, unspecified, to the International Classification of Diseases, Tenth Revision (ICD-10), which is now under development by a working committee of the International Agency for Research on Cancer. Unfortunately ICD-10 will not go into effect for coding death certificates until 1993.

Until then, the best data available on mesothelioma are incidence data collected by the Surveillance, Epidemiology and End Results (SEER) Program (1) at the National Cancer Institute and at other cancer registries. SEER collects data on all cancers in 10 areas of the United States (about 10 percent of the U.S. population). With today's SEER quality control measures, 97 percent of mesotheliomas are found in the pleura or peritoneum in contrast to 78 percent shown in table 2 of this paper, which was taken from the Third National Cancer Survey data in the early 1970s. A research project is underway at SEER to determine the accuracy of the cause of death of the mesotheliomas collected by SEER from 1973 to 1983, and the findings should be published in the coming year.

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Reference

1. Young, J. L., Jr., Percy, C. L., and Asire, A., editors: Surveillance, Epidemiology, End Results: Incidence and Mortality Data, 1973-1977. National Cancer Institute Monogr 57 (NIH) Publication No. 81-2330, June 1981.