Preliminary Findings for Pleural Mesothelioma among Women in the Québec Chrysotile Mining Regions

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INTRODUCTION

The chrysotile mining region of Québec, Canada, has two distinct zones, one of which is centered around the town of Thetford Mines and the other of which is centered around the town of Asbestos. The current work is part of a series of studies aimed at identifying risk factors for asbestos-related disease for women in the Québec chrysotile-mining regions (Camus et al., 1998), and use of these data as a test for existing asbestos risk assessments (Camus et al., 2002). The study described in this preliminary communication aimed at determining the geographic distribution of mesothelioma risk in this area, and at estimating risk as a function of exposure to asbestos.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Data collection

We identified from hospital records, oncology archives and pathology records all cancers of the pleura or peritoneum diagnosed among women aged ≥50 yr in which the hospital chart made mention of a possible diagnosis of mesothelioma, in hospitals in the populated portion of Québec province.

Cases and validation

In total, 233 potential cases of mesothelioma in women diagnosed 1970–89 were identified throughout
the province, and for each case the hospital pathology department was contacted and pathology blocks and slides requested. For the present study, only potential \textit{area cases} are considered, defined as all of those first diagnosed between 1 January 1970 and 31 December 1989, living in one of the two mining regions at the date of diagnosis.

For each of the potential cases for whom histological material was available, histological and immunohistochemical materials were circulated blind to two expert pathologists (Drs Andrew Churg and Victor Roggli). Each pathologist issued an opinion as to whether mesothelioma diagnosis was definite, probable, possible or definitely not mesothelioma, or if applicable that material was insufficient for diagnosis. For those cases for which histological materials were not available a probability of diagnosis was assigned on a 10 point scale developed by one of us (B.W.C.). We accepted all cases that were definite, probable or possible mesothelioma as determined by either of the two pathologists or, when pathology material was unavailable, through an algorithm applied to the 10 point rating score (B.W. Case, V. Roggli, A. Churg, M. Camus, J. Siemiatycki, in preparation).

Case-control selection and interviews

Controls were selected from 817 female residents of the mining region interviewed previously in 1989 (Camus \textit{et al.}, 1998). For each identified mesothelioma case, 15 of these controls were chosen, matched as closely as possible for age and area of residence. Controls had previously been interviewed for lifetime residential history, domestic exposure (number of workers with whom they lived and when, and type and duration of work for each), and complete lifetime residential and work histories. The same questionnaire was shortened and administered to obtain similar data on lifetime residential, domestic and occupational histories from proxies for each case.

Exposure in fiber-years for both cases and controls was estimated according to the methods described previously (Camus \textit{et al.}, 1998).

\textbf{RESULTS}

Ten pleural mesothelioma cases were identified in this study, all in the Thetford Mines area. Seven had tissue available for review by the two pathologists, and an eighth had been evaluated at the time of diagnosis by other members of the US–Canada mesothelioma panel. Six cases were considered definite or probable mesothelioma and a seventh ‘possible’ by the pathologists. The eighth case had insufficient tissue for diagnosis according to both pathologists (A.C. and V.R.), although available pathology records suggested a high probability of mesothelioma. This case, the case in which both pathologists agreed the diagnosis was ‘possible’, and the two cases for which tissue was unavailable were retained after applying the algorithm we developed. The six definite or probable and four possible cases are grouped together for case-control comparisons.

Cases and controls were similar demographically in most respects. Mean age at diagnosis (years) was 63 yr for both. Cases (mean 23 cigarettes/day) smoked more heavily than controls (13.4) and began smoking earlier, but differences are not statistically significant. Half of cases and 46% of controls were born before 1920; all cases were married or widowed while 18% of controls were single. One hundred percent of cases and 70% of controls were born in the county in which Thetford Mines is located.

Principal results are outlined in Tables 1 and 2. All 10 cases lived for all of the years of their lives (other than the final 20 in one case) in the Thetford Mines area, more specifically in the western part. This is the portion adjacent to the ‘central mines’ known to have the highest tremolite content (McDonald \textit{et al.}, 1997).

\begin{table}
\centering
\begin{tabular}{lccc}
\hline
& \textbf{Cases (% \textit{n} = 10)} & \textbf{Controls (% \textit{n} = 150)} & \textbf{Relative risk (95\% confidence interval)} \\
\hline
\textbf{Occupational exposures} \\
Worked outside home & & & \\
Any job & 100 & 41.7 & \\
Asbestos job & 50 & 2.7 & 53.8 (6–470) \\
\hline
\textbf{Domestic exposures} \\
Never lived with asbestos worker & 10 & 35.3 & 1.0 \\
1 or 2 workers & 50 & 48.0 & 3.4 (0.4–30.8) \\
3 or more workers & 40 & 16.7 & 9.0 (0.9–87.4) \\
\hline
\textbf{Cumulative years lived with worker(s)} & & & \\
1–40 & 55.6 & 69.1 & 3.9 (0.4–35) \\
>40 & 44.4 & 30.9 & 7.5 (0.8–72) \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Occupational and domestic exposures of mesothelioma cases and controls}
\end{table}
Table 2. Estimated cumulative asbestos exposure (fibers/ml-yr) in mesothelioma cases and controls

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of exposure</th>
<th>Estimated cumulative asbestos exposure (fibers/ml-yr)*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cases (n = 10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupational</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Among all cases and controls</td>
<td>94.5 (n = 10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Among occupationally exposed</td>
<td>236.3 (n = 5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domestic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Among all cases and controls</td>
<td>29.6 (n = 10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Among domestically exposed</td>
<td>32.9 (n = 9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Residential</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(All cases and controls)</td>
<td>102.0 (n = 10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All exposure sources combined</td>
<td>226.1 (n = 10)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*As estimated by methods described by Camus et al. (1998).

Discussion and Conclusions

Domestic exposures in nine of the 10 cases were in part related to work by household members in one or more of the central mines, but no attempt was made to compare these in a quantitative fashion to the (also very frequent) domestic exposures in the control population (Table 1). Estimated cumulative exposures for occupational, domestic and residential sources are outlined in Table 2, calculated as described in Camus et al. (1998). Figures shown in the table are the ‘best estimates’ as determined by the methods developed by one of us (M.C.) in association with the expert panel.

The case-control study was susceptible to errors both in the diagnosis of mesothelioma and in the exposure assessment, and to bias. We used a conservative case definition which included all possible cases. This may have attenuated case-control differences (Rogers et al., 1991). The retrospective assessment of exposure was particularly challenging. The expert panel involved in determining the parameters for this assessment had access to multiple data sources, but actual fiber measurements in the different environments assessed (neighborhood, domestic, occupational) were few and relatively recent (Camus et al., 1998). Nevertheless, we believe that exposure estimates are accurate within the bounds stated (i.e. a 5-fold possible error in either direction).

One possible source of bias in the case-control comparisons is related to the sampling strategy used for controls. Namely, for the study from which controls were derived, subjects were stratified to over-represent residents from rural areas surrounding the mining towns. This could have led to overstating the residential exposure differences between cases and controls. Nevertheless, as may be seen in Table 2, exposure estimates for controls—and for the entire population from which controls were drawn—were for the most part non-trivial (63.1 ± 44.8 fibers/ml-yr cumulative exposure for controls, with a range of 0.04–122.9 fibers/ml-yr).

The case-control comparison demonstrated the particularly high risk associated with having worked in the asbestos industry. Two cases worked as cobbers prior to World War II; this work was done by hand. Three additional cases were women who worked in a single unventilated asbestos bag fabrication and repair shop (Case et al., 1990; and A. Dufresne, personal communication) in the period immediately following World War II. Bags were made of burlap, and came from locations both within and outside Thetford Mines. Lung-retained fiber analysis (fibers >5 µm/µg dry lung; aspect ratio >3:1; assessed by analytical transmission electron microscopy (Case and Sébastien, 1987)) had been performed for two of these three cases, and for a third woman who died from lung cancer and asbestosis who worked in the same facility during the same years (Case et al., 1990). In the two mesothelioma cases lung levels of tremolite were 5.0 and 29.9 fibers/µg and chrysotile 2.9 and 7.5 fibers/µg, respectively. In one of the two...
lum tissue also contained crocidolite (1.4 fibers/µg) and amosite (1.1 fibers/µg). For the woman with lung cancer and asbestosis who worked in the same facility, lung tissue contained 45 chrysotile fibers/µg dry lung, 36 tremolite fibers/µg and 8.4 amosite fibers/µg (fibers >5 µm). Tissue for lung burden analysis was not available for any of the other mesothelioma cases.

In summary, all cases of pleural mesothelioma—whether definite, probable or possible—were found in Thetford Mines, and all lived close to the central mines. Further, all of the cases had incurred very high cumulative exposures, including half as workers in the industry and all but one as relatives of one or more workers in the industry. Additional data refinement and statistical analyses are in progress.

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REFERENCES