

Sir Richard Doll Dies at 92; Linked Smoking to Illnesses

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Sir Richard Doll, a British epidemiologist whose pioneering studies lasting more than 50 years linked smoking to lung cancer, emphysema, heart attacks and many other ailments, died on Sunday in John Radcliffe Hospital in Oxford, England. He was 92.

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Damian Dovarganes/Associated Press

Sir Richard Doll in 2003.

Sir Richard worked until his death, which was from acute heart failure, said Sir Richard Peto, a colleague for more than 30 years. "He was one of the greatest epidemiologists of our time," he said yesterday. "His work prevented millions of deaths and will prevent tens of millions more deaths this century."

Sir Richard's research extended to many other areas.

In an interview in a medical journal, he said that his second-most-important work was showing that even small doses of ionizing radiation could produce cancer.

Also, he linked asbestos to lung cancer and mesothelioma, a cancer of the lining covering the lung and abdomen. Research by Sir Richard and studies conducted independently by Dr. Irving J. Selikoff of Mount Sinai Medical School in New York, led to a significant reduction in the use of asbestos.

With other scientists, Sir Richard studied oral contraceptives and concluded that the pills provided benefits that outweighed

the small risks associated with their use.

Sir Richard's fame rests largely on the studies he and Sir Austin Bradford Hill conducted on more than 40,000 British doctors. Their work provided strong evidence of the hazards of cigarette smoking.

As early as the mid-19th century, doctors expressed fears about the dangers of smoking. In the 1930's and 1940's, German and Dutch doctors published early studies suggesting a link between smoking and lung cancer. The findings did not draw wide attention among scientists, in part because they were not published in English.

Shortly after World War II, doctors began noticing with alarm a steep rise in the incidence of lung cancer.

About 1947, the Medical Research Council, the British equivalent of the National Institutes of Health, asked Sir Austin, a professor of medical statistics at the London School of Hygiene, to investigate the causes of lung cancer. Sir Austin, who was not a medical doctor, asked Sir Richard to join him.

Initially, Sir Richard said that he and most other physicians did not see a link between cigarettes and lung cancer. In fact, Sir Richard said in an interview with this reporter that at first he suspected that the tar used to pave the growing number of roads, or possibly automobile exhaust, were at the root of the lung cancer epidemic.

The clues about cigarette smoking came from hundreds of interviews that Sir Richard conducted in which he asked lung cancer patients at about 20 hospitals in London about a number of their lifetime habits and exposures.

The earliest findings in 1949 were striking. Only cigarette smoking stood out. But because the findings were from a case-control study and were not in themselves definitive and because the study was confined to London, the chairman of the Medical Research Council, Sir Harold Himsworth, urged caution before they were published.

Sir Harold, a physician, was also concerned because the findings were so critically important and unexpected. He demanded that Sir Austin and Sir Richard confirm them in studies elsewhere in England. They did.

In 1950, a small number of other researchers, including Dr. Ernst Wynder in New York City, independently published

evidence linking cigarette smoking to lung cancer.

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After Sir Richard and Sir Austin published their findings, they began additional studies, including the one involving British physicians, which lasted 50 years.

Last year, Sir Richard published the 50-year - and final - report on the doctor group. The findings were surprising, Sir Richard said, because they showed that starting to smoke cigarettes early in life exerted a much greater effect than he had suspected. Smoking over a lifetime shortened the life span by 10 years on average, the study found. It is widely believed to be the first such research to assess the damage of smoking over that long a period.

Nearly half of persistent cigarette smokers in the study died because of smoking-related illnesses.

But Sir Richard also found that people who stopped smoking, regardless of age, could reduce the danger.

"Stopping smoking at ages 60, 50, 40 or 30 gains 3, 6, 9 or the full 10 years of life expectancy," said the colleague, Sir Richard Peto, who was a co-author of the study.

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