

U scientists tackle disease that hits Iron Range hard

● Researchers will try to find out why so many miners have been struck down by mesothelioma.

By LARRY OAKES • loakes@startribune.com

MOUNTAIN IRON, MINN. – University of Minnesota scientists have settled on research methods and begun collecting data they'll need to try to determine why Iron Range miners die from mesothelioma at higher rates than others and whether they are at greater risk for other health problems.

The School of Public Health's plans, recently approved by an independent scientific review board, include examining the work, health and death records of 68,000 miners, many of them long deceased. The work also will include health assessments on 1,200 current and retired workers, plus 800 of their spouses, researchers said at a briefing Thursday evening for Iron Range residents.

Coordinators said they've struck confidentiality agreements with several mining companies to obtain work history data that they'll use to search for correlations between exposure to taconite dust and a range of health problems, including mesothelioma and other cancers. And they've begun sampling dust and ore from the mines for analysis.

Also, scientists from the university's **Disease continues on B4 ►** Natural Resources Research Institute say they've begun installing dust collectors in seven Iron Range communities. The devices capture mineral fibers so that they can be cataloged and compared to those captured outside the Iron Range.

The five-year, \$4.9 million

study, funded by the Legislature in April, will be "the best effort to this point to get to the bottom of this," said John Finnegan Jr., dean of the school and a coordinator of the Minnesota Taconite Workers Lung Health Partnership.

A 2003 state Health Department study found that 17 miners developed mesothelioma between 1988 and 1996 and that commercial asbestos was likely the cause. Critics said the researchers didn't look hard enough at taconite dust, some fibers of which are very similar to asbestos.

In 2006, the department discovered 35 new mesothelioma cases in a cancer-tracking registry but didn't announce them for a year, a controversial decision that led to the resignation of Health Commissioner Dianne Mandernach. Iron Range legislators then demanded the current study. In the meantime, six more cases have been discovered, bringing the number of deaths to 58 since 1988, the year the registry was created.

Dr. Ian Greaves, an expert on lung diseases at the university and a member of the study team, said an important goal is to determine what levels of exposure might be dangerous and to develop recommendations for reducing it. He said researchers in April will begin contacting miners picked for health assessments. In addition, experts are advising Iron Range doctors on the best screening and treatment methods.

"I think we're going to ac-

tually find something out this time around," said Sen. David Tomassoni, DFL-Chisholm.

David Walkki of Mountain Iron was a welder in the mines for 18 years before developing chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, though he never smoked. He said he was encouraged by the team's assurances that it will go beyond mesothelioma and look for links to a variety of lung ailments.

"I'm already on the deck of the Titanic," said Walkki, 55. "But if they figure this out, they'll protect the workers of the future."

For more information, go online to www.sph.umn.edu/lunghealth. Or to talk to a registered nurse about taconite worker lung health, call 1-888-840-7590.

Larry Oakes • 1-800-266-9648



«I'M ALREADY ON THE DECK OF THE TITANIC. BUT IF THEY FIGURE THIS OUT, THEY'LL PROTECT THE WORKERS OF THE FUTURE.» David Walkki of Mountain Iron, who was a welder in the mines for 18 years