

Mesothelioma study passed Senate panel

\$4.9 million for research

By BRADY SILVER
Legislative Correspondent

ST. PAUL — Senators passed \$4.9 million for mesothelioma-related research out of a finance subdivision committee Tuesday after being reminded of the human side of the study.

Mesothelioma is a rare lung disease that has only been linked to asbestos exposure. But its relatively frequent occurrence in former taconite miners has created a well of support for further research into the source of the disease.

Bruce Vento, a former state and U.S. representative from St. Paul, died from complications related to mesothelioma. His wife Sue testified at the Higher Education Budget and Policy Division Committee meeting. It's an overlooked disease, she said, many times people will die before they even get a proper diagnosis, since it is often confused with lung cancer. "The same thing happened to Bruce."

"When we went to the Mayo Clinic they told us it wasn't cancer. It was mesothelioma," she said. "We thought that was a good thing."

Bruce Vento never worked in the mines. Most likely, she said, he was exposed to asbestos from his factory jobs in the 1960s.

He had a lung removed along with parts of several other organs before receiving chemotherapy and radiation treatment. He died eight months after his diagnosis.

Charlie Olson is another who spoke to the committee. A taconite miner for 38 years in Hibbing, Olson is hoping to retire soon.

"I'm not asking for me," he said. "... What we're concerned about are the younger miners. We need to find out what the dangers are in order to keep ourselves safe and our families safe."

However, there were also some less enthusiastic comments.

The Minnesota Chamber of Commerce fully supports the goal and direction of the study, but doesn't like where the money would come from. The \$4.9 million will be taken from the Workers Compensation Fund that is paid into by state businesses. The money is usually spent on covering employees who were injured, but since it is all unspent 2008 money it won't detract from anyone's benefits.

The Department of Labor and Industry is also against using the fund, in part because it would result in an increased assessment to businesses next year. The size of the increase was unavailable.

Instead, a representative from the department said that the governor's plan, which suggests \$2 million from the general fund and \$2 million from the Iron Range Resources Board, is an alternative way to finance the project without tapping the fund.

But the governor's plan isn't as good, said Sen. Dave Tomassoni, DFL-Chisholm.

The IRRB money is paid by the taconite mines in lieu of property taxes, he said, and therefore isn't appropriate for this study. In addition, it's hard to find general fund dollars lying around these days.

In the end, the bill was referred to the Finance Committee. That committee will likely meet Friday, which is also the day of the third legislative deadline, thus it will likely be passed out of committee in time.

"It's a relatively non-controversial bill," Tomassoni said, and it could be on the Senate floor for a vote by next week.

The House version of the bill is also close to a floor vote, currently on the agenda of the Ways and Means Committee.