

The Fear Of Asbestos: How's Your Health?

By JILL JONNES

GREEN ISLAND —It's noisy and dark in the factory, the smell of chemicals is powerful. Everywhere machines are clanking, conveyor belts are moving and people are doing their jobs.

A million brake linings a week are being turned out by the workers of Bendix Corporation, Friction Materials Division, Green Island. It seems like any other factory, with one vital difference: about 500 workers handle asbestos.

Asbestos — most people know it as a fireproofing, certainly nothing to worry about. But to public health officials, asbestos is a hazard which has been definitely linked for at least ten years to various debilitating and possibly fatal forms of cancer. Any worker who is exposed to enough asbestos is a possible future statistic, one susceptible to asbestiosis, mesothelioma or lung cancer.

Research in Great Britain, South Africa and this country shows that danger begins with the first exposure to asbestos, because when the minute mineral fibers are inhaled, they remain in the lungs forever. The fibers can lodge in the tissue of the lungs or stomach or intestine. Asbestos workers who smoke have a threefold greater chance of getting lung cancer than the general smoking population.

Health experts say these diseases are usually dormant for 25 to 30 years and even then they are often not identified as asbestos-related, but assumed to be some more common form of cancer.

A little more than a year ago, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, which took over jurisdiction in this area in 1972, began a series of inspections at Bendix to determine if federal regulations concerning worker health and asbestos were being followed.

OSHA reports on the conditions at the

Bendix plant obtained by The Times Record show that during inspections in August, September and November of 1974 the number of asbestos fibers in the air at Bendix often exceeded the number allowed under federal law by significant amounts.

The Bendix plant is now on what OSHA calls a "multi-step abatement plan" to lower the amount of asbestos workers breathe during the day.

The plan calls for better ventilation, changes in work practice (such as wetting asbestos), respirator masks, special changing rooms and showers so workers won't carry asbestos dust home with them.

John Bell, a spokesman for Bendix headquarters in South Bend, Ind. said the company first became aware of the hazards of asbestos to its workers in the 1930's. "The company had a continual awareness of the problem and has adjusted its operations accordingly."

He noted, "No scientific report that indicates the possibility of an adverse effect on employees can be ignored."

However, several workers at the plant all of whom asked not to be identified said it was their feeling the company only moved seriously to deal with the asbestos problem because OSHA came in. "Everyone's pretty sure that everything they're doing is because the government got on their back, because before that there was a cloud of dust in the air. Now the dust system is so good you can't hardly see any dust," said one worker.

The industrial hygienist involved in the 10-day inspection at Bendix last year said in mid-October, "Before the law, I imagine they didn't do much, but then neither did anyone else."

He praised Bendix for its installation of extensive dust collecting systems (almost \$2 million worth) and their

(Continued on Page 19)

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(Continued from Page 1)

accurate record keeping on asbestos fiber levels in the plant.

He said, "Progress is probably due to our inspection and citation, but they have shown a very good spirit of cooperation, although what we did probably spurred them on."

The Bendix people think they have maintained high standards in spite of the fact they had numerous violations. They say, "The violations weren't intentional. It is a breakdown in the procedure, in the machinery. It takes hundreds of people cooperating to attain high safety standards."

Yet workers report that as recently as three years ago the company was dumping the asbestos dust collected from the air in the plant into an open pile across the street from the plant. From there, some Green Island residents claim it would blow into the village.

Ray Blair, plant manager, confirms that the asbestos dust was dumped across from the plant, although he said the dust was plowed under.

One short-term employee said, "It was like moon dust. I had to shovel it into these bags and then it was dumped in this pile across the street. They were getting in serious trouble because it was some sort of asbestos dust or fibers. They did this for years and years. One of the state agencies got on them and they cleaned it up."

Actually OSHA ordered the practice stopped and the company now has a gigantic machine into which all the asbestos dust is piped. There the dust is "pelletized" into hard pellets which the company buries.

OSHA isn't the only watchdog agency Bendix has heard from about asbestos.

In July of this year Bendix was served with an order from the Environmental Protection Agency to stop releasing asbestos particles into the air by the end of August or to face being shut down. The company complied and EPA officials said at the time, "They were very cooperative."

The inspector in that case said the plant would have been shut down immediately if the asbestos had been the fine, dust-like form which is most easily inhaled, but the asbestos was in heavier form which is less dangerous. So the plant was given 45 days to clean up.

Although the first medical evidence of a link between occupational exposure to asbestos and lung cancer was available in 1955, it was not until the early 1960's that Dr. Irving J. Selikoff began to pile up medical evidence for what he calls, "An occupational disaster without parallel in American history."

Selikoff, who works at Mt. Sinai School of Medicine in New York City, began to keep track of 632 members of the New Jersey and New York Asbestos Workers Union. Twenty years later, in 1943, 203 of these men should have died. Instead, 255 were dead, an excess over the normal death rate of 20 per cent.

According to statistical norms for their population group seven men should have died from lung cancer. In this group 45 were dead. Instead of the expected 10 deaths from cancer of the stomach, colon or rectum there were 29. And there were 12 dead from asbestosis and four from mesothelioma, two diseases directly related to asbestos.

Selikoff, now an expert in the field of occupational diseases connected with



BENDIX EMPLOYEE Helen Bates of Troy wears a respirator mask while working with brake linings. Workers will not have to wear the masks once the number of asbestos fibers in the air is within the federal limit. (Photo by Jill James)

asbestos, has found similar results in study after study. It was his research which showed asbestos workers to have a three times greater chance of getting lung cancer if they smoked. In conjunction with working with asbestos. The government has gone to great lengths in recent years to ensure that asbestos fibers do not go beyond the work area. This is because, according to an OSHA pamphlet, asbestos-related disease "is not contingent upon large or repeated exposure to asbestos. Mesothelioma has been reported in asbestos workers' wives, whose only contact with the substance was washing their husbands' work clothes."

The present OSHA standard (which Bendix was in violation of) allows an asbestos worker to be exposed to five million fibers per cubic meter of air. It is already considered obsolete and labor leaders have criticized the level as far too high for years.

The change was to have been from five million to two million fibers in 1976. This level was based on the experience in one British asbestos factory, where a study of 290 men indicated that at twice the two million level only a small percentage of workers exposed 10 years or longer developed lung scarring.

However, these same workers have since been reexamined and X-ray evidence of lung abnormalities was found in 40 to 70 per cent of the same group of workers. In addition, a number of asbestos-related work cancers was found.

In light of these findings, new standards were recently proposed by OSHA which would lower the number of fibers in the air to a tenth the current amount, or one half million fibers per cubic meter averaged over an eight hour day.

In addition to lowering the level of asbestos dust breathed in, federal law mandates that asbestos workers must have a physical exam within 30 days of being hired, a once-a-year chest X-ray and a final physical when a worker leaves the job. Under the new proposed regulations, these records would have to be kept 40 years or the duration of the workers' employment plus 20 years,

whichever is longer.

However, there is no provision for informing asbestos workers of the possible danger from asbestosis, mesothelioma or lung cancer. The regulations require only that signs in the work area warn that asbestos is dangerous to work with. There is no explanation given.

Several workers at Bendix said no one ever informed them of what the actual hazards of working with asbestos are or that smoking combined with asbestos work is probably not a good idea. One worker said, "They've never said it (smoking) would compound the problem."

Bendix spokesman Bell said that while the company had signs up saying "No smoking" and workers receive pamphlets telling them smoking in general is dangerous, he does not think workers have actually been told of the fact that asbestos workers are increasing their chances of getting lung cancer threefold by smoking.

Bell said, "Because of the tremendous amount of information published about the subject" the company assumes workers are aware of the problem.

There is also the question, according to Bell, of an infringement on individual rights of the worker.

The company has also made no attempt to contact former or retired workers who are now prone to asbestos-related diseases.

Bell says, "There has been no attempt to circulate information about what retirees should or should not do in terms of personal health practices."

Since it is a fairly small plant, Bell says there is contact with retirees and he says, "There is no indication whatsoever of any abnormal pattern of illness or death as a result of working with asbestos."

In the case of Bendix there appears to be no way of determining whether long-term employees and retirees have been affected by their work with asbestos.

Inquiries made by The Times Record to the Cancer Bureau, a state agency which keeps track of all cancer deaths, and to the Workers' Compensation Board, turned up only the fact that asbestos-related diseases are very hard to pinpoint.

A man at Workers' Compensation said, "Since asbestos is a carcinogen, probably most people who get sick just think it's cancer."

This feeling was echoed by a doctor at the Cancer Bureau: "Unless a doctor or coroner knows what he's looking for, he will probably assume the person died from regular cancer."

An obvious question in all this is: where were the health inspectors before 1974? The answer, according to OSHA workers, is that the state Department of Labor, which was then responsible for enforcing health standards, simply did not have enough people. "They had one guy for over 50 counties so he was spread a little thin. And although asbestos is a bad thing, so are other things like lead."

The Department of Labor people say however, that a search of past records turned up nothing on inspections in Bendix concerning asbestos. "To the best recollection of our staff we were in there numerous times, but primarily in the area of industrial ventilation."