FILE NAME: Asbestos Sacks and Bags (ASB)

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Ministry of Labour
~~St. James's Square, London, S.W.1.~~
Baynards House, 1-13 Chepstow Place,
Westbourne Grove, LONDON, W.2.

~~WHItehall 6200~~
BAYswater 3456
Ext. 384.

Our reference: SHW 3787/65

27th October, 1965.

Dear Mr. Brazier,

The Factory Inspectorate have now completed their investigations into the handling of asbestos in the docks, which were put in hand following complaints in July about dusty conditions in one particular vessel in the London docks. The National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers Union then obtained medical advice from Dr. Hunter of the Institute of Clinical Research, Middlesex Hospital, to the effect that men working in the hold and in the barges needed to wear a mask in order to protect them from the asbestos dust. Provision of vacuum suction to remove any spillage during unloading was also recommended. The Inspectorate do not disagree with these recommendations. Such precautions are probably necessary in the conditions which were found on the ship in question, as asbestos was being unloaded in unsealed hessian sacks. When other forms of packaging are used, the Inspectorate's view, based on the investigations described below, is that masks are unnecessary. The dockers themselves can do much to maintain satisfactory condition by careful unloading of the cargo.

The danger of developing asbestosis has been appreciated for many years. The asbestos textile industry has been subject to controlling Regulations since 1931. Asbestosis also affects other workers using asbestos, or materials containing asbestos, and measures to control more adequately the use of such materials are currently being considered by the Factory Inspectorate. The Inspectorate knows, however, of no case of asbestosis attributable to employment in the docks unloading asbestos. Similarly, no cases in such workers have been diagnosed by the Pneumoconiosis Medical Panels.

Most dockers are only intermittently or occasionally exposed to asbestos, but to determine whether conditions during unloading were such as to make the development of asbestosis likely or possible, given sufficient length of exposure, a series of investigations into the amount of air-borne asbestos has now been undertaken by the Chemical Inspectors of the Inspectorate. It should be understood that the significant portion of asbestos dust which is of a size capable of penetrating to the ultimate structures of the lung may not correspond to the amount visible to the unaided eye.

The outcome of these tests is to indicate that the amount of air-borne dust of respirable size has been below the published upper limit of safety where hessian sacks with an impervious lining, or laminated paper bags, or other impervious bags, have been in use, and it has also been below the limit when unlined hessian sacks were used and a slow rate of working has been in operation. The limit has been exceeded where unlined hessian sacks were used and the rate of working was normal. The Inspectorate's opinion is that with the normal intermittent exposure likely to be experienced by dockers, the risk of a docker developing clinically recognisable asbestosis is slight, provided impervious sacks are used. As they are unlikely to develop asbestosis, then they are no more liable to develop a lung cancer than the rest of the population.

/Discussions

M. J. Brazier, Esq.,
Messrs. A. A. Brazier & Co. (Asbestos) Ltd.,
Newby House,
309 Chase Road,
LONDON, N.14.

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Discussions are proposed with the importers of asbestos on the elimination of unsealed hessian sacks and the ultimate possibility of palletting as an alternative means of handling.

In the last year or two there has been much publicity attached to a rare form of tumour known as mesothelioma. This appears to be commoner in those exposed to asbestos. The problem is at present under urgent review by an Advisory Panel set up by the Senior Medical Inspector of Factories. The risk is certainly no greater in dockers than in other workers exposed to asbestos.

Dr. Hunter and Dr. Kanantzis, his deputy, have been given copies of this letter and agree, in general, with the contents.

I am writing in similar terms to the other parties with an interest in the matter viz: Mr. T. O'Leary of the Transport & General Workers Union; Dr. R. Gaze of Cape Asbestos, who has also been representing the asbestos importers; Mr. J. Beech of the National Amalgamated Stevedores & Dockers Union, who first raised the matter with Dr. Hunter; and Mr. Bennett, Secretary of the Ocean Shipowners Group Joint Committee.

Yours sincerely,

A. F. Hatfull

(A. F. HATFULL)