

General Motors Corporation has, for years, been committed to protecting our employees by recognizing, evaluating, and controlling exposure to toxic materials. To a large extent, these programs are only now being required by various regulations. It is our continuing practice to evaluate all materials prior to their use. The evaluation considers impact on the environment, health, product performance, and cost, including the cost of government control. Thus, if a material we might be considering requires environmental assessment, or the administration of medical examinations to employees, those costs are also included.

We are prepared to change present practices, when there is need to do so. For example, when it became accepted by the medical community that excessive airborne exposure to asbestos fiber was more hazardous than previously thought, we re-evaluated our use of the mineral. Workplace and ambient air quality were monitored. Employees were given medical examinations designed to determine the presence of typical abnormalities caused by asbestos. New processes are continually being investigated and substitute materials are being sought.

The use of asbestos fiber and asbestos-containing products was reviewed by local GM plant hazardous materials control committees. The committees are composed of people knowledgeable about production processes, chemistry, and health and environmental effects. They evaluate all present or potential materials and recommend safe methods for storage, handling, use and disposal.

As a result of all this review and testing—which is continuing today—we revamped our asbestos-related operations at many GM plants. The changes required a significant investment... but resulted in improvements in the environment and in the protection and preservation of employee health and safety.

Let me emphasize that we did this in response to new medical findings. Much of our work occurred

before the federal government published its asbestos rules.

One phase of our evaluation of asbestos considered availability and cost of control. We do not foresee an imminent supply problem with grades currently in use at General Motors. But the legislative and regulatory climate is uncertain, and the cost of the continuing use of asbestos may be dependent upon the existence of stringent compliance requirements.

For example, if the exposure limit is reduced to that which NIOSH has proposed, our compliance costs will certainly increase. However, if the limit is not as stringent as presently proposed by NIOSH, we feel that with some added processing and tooling expense we could meet the standard in most of our operations.

Based on current information, however, we do not see an urgent need to curtail all asbestos usage. But we do believe alternate materials must be examined, should the need arise, for economic or health reasons, to replace asbestos-containing materials. Thus, we agree that non-essential uses of asbestos should be controlled whenever adequate substitutes are readily available... providing those substitutes are economically feasible, and providing they will not result in any new health risks.

At General Motors, our largest use of asbestos is in friction materials such as the 5-6 million sets of brake linings and about 44 million clutch facings we produce each year. Other uses include various gaskets, sound deadeners for metal fillers in mastics and adhesives, and some electrical component parts. We also use construction materials containing asbestos—cement, asbestos pipe, roofing felt, and floor tile, for example.¹

¹Since this paper was written in September 1980, General Motors has made a limited number of additional product changes which substitute non-asbestos ingredients for asbestos where functional tests have indicated the adequacy of non-asbestos containing compounds.

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