

Shock report on UK asbestos firm

by MARTIN BAILEY

THE BRITISH asbestos company Turner & Newall exposed its Swaziland workers to dust levels more than 25 times above the safety standard allowed by company policy, according to an unpublished report obtained by THE OBSERVER.

The study reveals that dust levels at the Havelock mine and mill, employing 2,100 people, were above 50 fibres per cu cm in some areas until 1976. Although they have since decreased, they are still above the company's safety standard in parts of the plant.

The Havelock study, prepared by the UK Medical Research Council, also reveals that nearly a third of the workers sampled in 1978 had developed asbestosis. The company's former doctor in Swaziland, Dr Anthony Bradley, who helped write the report, admits that he was 'shocked' at the results. 'Before the survey we had simply been misdiagnosing what turned out to be asbestosis,' he said.

T & N, the company at the centre of a row over the Yorkshire Television film 'Alice,' secretly considered closing down the mine three years ago. But Dr Bradley, who has since left T & N, said: 'It was right not to shut down the mine because of the effect it would have had on unemployment.'

But even now, according to the study, 'In dry, windy weather dust from the mill and waste tips is blown over the whole area, so that even estate workers are exposed to the "background" level.'

These new revelations about T & N's safety standards are likely to put further pressure on the company to reduce dust levels. Its shares have already dropped

in value by £11 million during the past two weeks because of mounting concern of litigation from asbestos victims.

The study of the mine at Havelock, 60 per cent owned by T & N and 40 per cent by the Swaziland Government, was prepared by the Cardiff-based Medical Research Council's Pneumoconiosis Unit. Two of the five members of the team, Dr Bradley and Dr John Allardice, were doctors working for T & N.

The results of the study, which is due to be published later this year in the *British Journal of Industrial Medicine*, claims that for the period until 1976, 'no accurate estimates of dust exposure are possible, as monitoring of the airborne dust was not started' until then.

Dangerous

Dr Bradley, who was Havelock's doctor throughout the 1970s, has admitted to THE OBSERVER that 'although there was no regular monitoring, dust levels were recorded on an occasional basis.' These figures, he said, showed that white asbestos dust levels in some parts of the mill exceeded 50 fibres per cu cm.

Even outside the mill, conditions were also dangerous. The Cardiff study points out that until 1970 asbestos was packed into hessian sacks and transported on a 13-mile aerial ropeway, 'which resulted in the workers on the ropeway receiving a high dust exposure.' A T & N publicity photograph shows nearly a hundred children playing outside the mine school, a hundred yards from the mill and its waste tips.

In 1976 a dust suppression programme was introduced,

according to Dr Bradley, partly because of pressure from the media. He said: 'Turners then made a real effort, and there was a major improvement.' Compensation was also given to asbestosis victims, ranging from £1,000 to £7,000.

But conditions at Havelock have contradicted T & N's public stand. Mr Patrick Griffith, then the company's chairman, told shareholders in the 1976 annual report: 'It is our policy to apply the current British (safety) standard... in our factories throughout the world.'

The UK legal limit, introduced in 1969, is 2 fibres per cu cm, which will shortly be reduced to 1 fibre. Yet according to the Cardiff study, the level at Havelock was 25 times this figure in 1976, and levels of exposure have 'gradually been decreasing' since then.

No figures of post-1976 dust levels are given in the Cardiff study. But Dr Bradley says that when he left Havelock two years ago, the maximum level at the mill was 15 fibres. Last week a company spokesman told THE OBSERVER that the average personal exposure for the 2,100 workers at Havelock was now below two fibres, and only 4 per cent of the work force received the equivalent of between two and three fibres.

But some dusty parts of the plant were therefore still above the UK standard.

The Cardiff study concluded that 43 per cent of the workers in the dustiest areas of Havelock had developed asbestos pneumoconiosis or asbestosis. Overall, 30 per cent of the 438 workers in the sample had contracted the first stage of the lung disease, known as category 1 pneumoconiosis.

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