

CRISIS RESPONSE

sprayers. I called everyone to the window. "That," I said, pointing across the street, "is why we have to take a walk on those people." We quietly informed Dr. Selikoff, the city of New York, and the EPA — which was also looking into asbestos spraying — that while we wouldn't attack the practice and health grounds, neither would we defend it. The practice was shortly banned by the city and later by the EPA nationally, with our concurrence.

Sometimes the problems that came floating in over the transom were just plain weird. In late 1971 I received a phone call from Dr. Selikoff. He had a problem that he hoped I could help him with. He said this was one we could both agree needed fixing. The situation he described was so preposterous even I had trouble believing any businessperson anywhere could be so ignorant of the evidence regarding the health risks of asbestos, or so callous he didn't care.

The situation was this. Import duties on finished asbestos products imported into the United States were essentially zero. On the other hand, the duties on clothing manufactured abroad were quite stiff. An Italian businessperson thought he had found a clever way to beat the customs folks at their own game. He produced thousands of ladies winter coats using a small amount of asbestos fiber in their manufacture and then tried to import them into the United States as "asbestos products" rather than as clothing. The coats were not even woven, but were a pressed melton, a type of material similar to that used in navy pea coats. Dr. Selikoff told me you could actually release free asbestos fibers from the coats using a small clothes brush. He wanted me to talk to the importer, who had contacted Dr. Selikoff for his assistance in convincing customs officials that the coats were safe. Dr. Selikoff said that he had tried reasoning with the importer, but that he refused to understand the seriousness of the problem, and was intent on forcing the issue with customs. Perhaps, he said, he would believe it if somebody from the asbestos industry backed up his concerns. I offered to meet with the importer, and Dr. Selikoff promised, in return, not to go to the media with the story until I had a chance to sit down with the importer and explain the hopelessness of his position.

I met with the importer a few days later. He couldn't see what the problem was. Women don't brush their coats every day, he argued, and besides, the amount of asbestos in the coats was very small, only enough to meet the customs service's definition of an asbestos product. As a fellow businessperson, he hoped I would understand that if the coats were declared unsafe, he couldn't sell them anywhere, let alone in the United States, and would lose his entire investment. I patiently explained that while the actual risk might be very small, the AIA considered what he had done a totally inappropriate use of asbestos and that we

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