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Asbestos Workers---Walking Backwards Until They Die

BY MIKE LA VELLE

CHICAGO—"One of the men in the asbestos workers' union, before he died, used to walk backwards. I had never seen this before until I began to care for asbestos workers. You may wonder why asbestos workers walk backwards. They don't always walk backwards. It is only going upstairs. They are so short of breath that after two steps they have to sit down. It is easier to go up a flight of stairs backwards than walking up. It is a terrible way to die."

That is from Dr. Irving Selikoff's testimony before the Senate Labor Committee in support of the Occupational Safety and Health Act.

Asbestos is a mineral composed of waxy white fibers, not unlike dental floss in appearance. Asbestos, a mineral found in serpentine rock, is virtually indestructible, is resistant to heat, cold and most chemicals. It does not decay or corrode. Though strong, asbestos fibers are so soft and flexible that they can be spun and woven like cotton. No matter how it is crushed, smaller and smaller fibers result.

Asbestos has an estimated 3,000 industrial uses, among them insulation for space rockets, roof shingles, siding, packing, gaskets, engine blankets, brake lining, mufflers, building construction and insulation, home furnishings, drapes, rugs, floors, ceiling tiles, potholders, oven lining.

Asbestos has been called the magic mineral of the 20th century and, as a measure of the ugly side of industrial progress, it even has a disease named after it: asbestosis.

The disease results from breathing in the tiny asbestos particles. It is a crippling, often fatal lung disease similar to coal miners' black lung, marked by coughing, shortness of breath, and a scarring of lung tissue revealed in X rays.

Asbestosis was first reported in medical literature in 1907 by an English doctor. Individual cases have been reported in the United States and Great Britain ever since.

Over the years the U.S. government has recommended a series of safe asbestos exposure levels, each lower than the previous level. Yet 12% of the deaths of workers at Johns Manville Corp. (the largest U.S. producer of asbestos) between 1959 and 1972 resulted from asbestosis.

Mike LaVelle, a hot pipe bender, writes about blue-collar affairs for the Chicago Tribune.

Eliminating all exposure is technically feasible, but for the moment no pressure for this seems to be coming from unions or government.

There seems to be a bit of economic blackmail in the asbestos manufacturers' claim that if they are pressed to end all exposure they would be left with two options—move to a more favorable labor climate or automate the existing plants. In either event, workers are in what is fast becoming a deadly work-and-health bind, struggling for industrial safety. Industry's response to their dilemma takes the form of threatening their jobs.

Except for a growing corps of dedicated doctors, science seems to be a netural observer. If there are any government, union or industry crash programs to change the asbestos industry hazards, I'm either ignorant of them or their administrators are doing a lousy job of advertising their efforts.

The difficulty in spreading the message of occupational hazards is that much of it is cumulative and undramatic. A victim of a lung disease isn't dancing one day and dead the next. It is a very slow, painful process not unlike cancer. One could, in fact, call asbestos a form of industrial cancer.

Selikoff did a study of 632 asbestos workers with 20 or more years of exposure and found their death rate to be 25% greater than other workers in a similar age bracket. The effects of asbestos are summed up best by a worker who said:

"At nighttime I can't sleep. It just seems like I'm sore all over. Now I even get pains in the chest and down the back and everything. My wife don't sleep with me. I cough too much at night. I'm 43 and I feel like 75."

Some progress is being made: asbestos workers, who previously could not look at their own X rays, now can do so through their 1970 contract with Johns Manville. Before then the company wouldn't give any valid medical information at all.

Even that is a new departure from the bread-and-butter contracts of the '50s, according to one union official: "We were aware of asbestosis then. I couldn't help but notice it. I saw people die from it. However, the time for action wasn't ripe in the '50s."

Well, it's ripe now. Ripe, hell. I'd say it's festering.

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