

TRENDS

HEALTH

Controlled use of asbestos

The Environmental Protection Agency's 1989 ban on asbestos has just been overturned in the American courts. As in France and many other countries, asbestos use in the USA must be controlled. For more than ten years now, the French asbestos industry has been working with all the professionals concerned - doctors, unions, and government agencies - to attain a maximum level of protection for employees and users. As a result of this effort, the plants of the Building Materials Division now surpass the standards in effect.

Following the French monthly «Que Choisir» the french television channel Antenne 2, and the newspaper «Libération», an ecological group announced last autumn that it planned to re-open the «asbestos» file. Some accuse health officials of being slow to recognize the occupational diseases linked to this fiber, while others target public buildings insulated with asbestos flocking. This attitude represents a legacy of the past: 30 or 40 years ago, heavy, prolonged exposure left an aftermath of tragic illnesses for asbestos workers. The problem was aggravated by a long latency period characteristic of illnesses connected to mineral particles. In 1984, following the lead of other countries, the French professionals concerned - in indus-

try, unions, science, and government agencies - created the Permanent Asbestos Committee. Its mission was to «study solutions adapted to the French situation and compatible with European and international positions.» Asbestos flocking was banned because the process used did not sufficiently contain the fibers.

Prevention program

When flocking is installed or removed, sites may be subject to high levels of dusting. The manufacture of fiber-cement plates, pipelines, fabric, and brake pads was strictly

regulated: dusting standards for workshops were set at 1 fiber per cm³. According to the EEC, this limit should be reduced to 0.6 fiber per cm³. Today, Everite is surpassing these standards. Bi-monthly tests performed in its workshops reveal levels between 0.5 and 0.1 fiber per cm³. To ensure work-site safety, the stringent measures taken by the Building Materials Division include cleaning overalls at the plant, grinding asbestos bags into the mixture, very strict package labelling, safety devices, water recycling, and soon, recycling of all dry waste. The division has applied this prevention program in France as well as internationally. In light of this concern for maximum safety, the daily Liberation writes that «the problem of worker protection seems to be corrected,» and Professor Brochard, a Committee member and specialist in occupational illnesses, adds that «the pollution resulting from the natural wear of asbestos-based materials is non-existent, or extremely slight.» International organizations like the World Health Organization (WHO), the International Labor Bureau (ILB), and the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development), relying on many scientific studies (particularly involving tolerance thresholds and exposure levels), recommend the controlled and regulated use of this fiber. This policy has been pursued in France, but rejected by its German neighbors, who hoped to ban asbestos use. As for the United States, the Environmental Protection Agency's decision to phase out asbestos in the USA by 1996 has just been overturned. The Appeals Court's decision rests in particular on the «lack of evidence brought by the EPA.» This is a significant decision at a time when Europe is pursuing its own regulation effort. ■