

POLITICS & POLICY

The construction industry was besotted with the miracle mineral, which cost just 25 cents a square foot when it became popular in the early 1960s. Asbestos was used for fireproofing and to insulate heat pipes, ducts, and boilers. Workers, often with cigarettes poking out from holes punched through thin protective paper masks, sprayed or troweled 1.4 billion square feet of asbestos onto structural beams and roof decks.

Like a genie turned against its master, asbestos is now recognized as an especially

sinister carcinogen. It has been implicated in the deaths and disabilities of thousands of shipyard workers, miners, and industrial laborers. Fibers that lodged in their lungs from massive exposure to airborne asbestos in the 1930s and 1940s led, decades later, to asbestosis, lung cancer, and mesothelioma—a rare killer that attacks the lining of the lungs and intestinal tract.

As the deaths mounted, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and state environmental agencies added asbestos to their long lists of hazardous substances and restricted its use as a building material in the early 1970s. Over the past decade, roughly 90,000 exposed asbestos workers have sued makers of asbestos-containing products, forcing Manville Corp. and some half-dozen other manufacturers to seek refuge in bankruptcy court.

COMMERCIAL property owners, lenders, and tenants are worried about becoming targets in the next round of suing. With age, normal maintenance, and continued building renovation, "friable" asbestos—so called because it crumbles easily when disturbed—will flake off the surface on which it was applied. As building workers snake telephone and computer cables along ceiling beams and tenants move in and out, asbestos fibers are released. The fibers are just half a micron long (a human hair is 80 microns in diameter) and can stay airborne for weeks.

In recent years, insurance companies have made it increasingly difficult for building owners to protect themselves from lawsuits by occupants who claim exposure to asbestos has damaged their health. One suit has already held a building owner accountable. Last year a jury in Cleveland awarded \$400,000 to a 47-year-old woman who said she contracted mesothelioma from breathing asbestos fibers in her job as a clerk in a federal office building. Some 20 other personal-damages suits against landlords are pending.

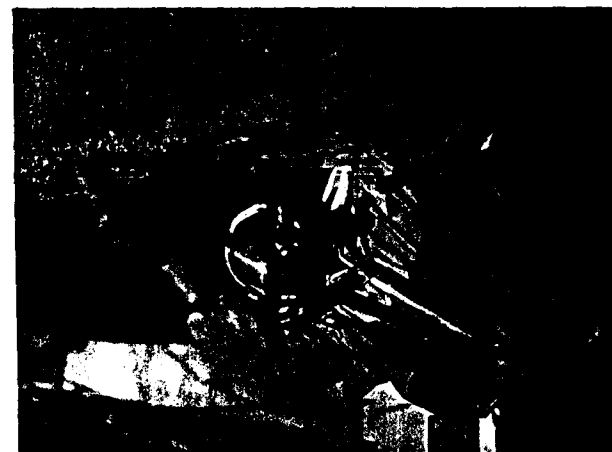
How deadly is the asbestos that may be in your office building? The answer: The risk is barely detectable.

In his pioneering research on U.S. shipyard and asbestos industry workers, published in the mid-1960s and 1970s, Dr. Irving Selikoff, an epidemiologist at New York's Mount Sinai Hospital, observed that asbes-

tos fibers are impervious to the body's natural defenses. He concluded that no level of exposure could be considered safe. But no solid evidence has since turned up to support that thesis. The latency period for the deadly diseases that afflicted the World War II shipyard workers averages from 20 to 30 years. Office workers and custodians, too, have been exposed through decades of building renovation and dusty demolition. Epidemiologists have yet to record a rise in asbestos-related deaths among these populations.

The victims Selikoff studied inhaled levels of airborne asbestos at least 10,000 times higher than those found in normal indoor room air. Research by British epidemiologists Richard Doll and Julian Peto puts the lifetime danger of exposure to room-air asbestos so low that it has been likened roughly to the risk of inhaling one drag of cigarette smoke per day. In the U.S., comparably low risks to workers in asbestos-laden office buildings emerge from studies by Dr. Robert Sawyer, a member of the University of Pennsylvania medical school's oncology department. Sawyer, a leading researcher on asbestos health effects and an occupational health adviser to the EPA and a list of corporate clients including Bechtel and Perkin-Elmer, concludes that maintenance workers who are exposed to asbestos and also smoke cigarettes may be especially susceptible to lung cancer. For all other office workers, he says, "There is no epidemiological evidence that shows a health hazard. Period."

THE EPA'S ATTEMPTS to quantify the risk of low-level exposure paint a reassuring picture. In a study it presented to Congress in February, the agency reported that the worst airborne asbestos levels in a sampling of 43 federal buildings were no higher than the levels found in outdoor air. EPA analysts tried to compute the total asbestos-related deaths from lung cancer and mesothelioma that commercial building occupants and maintenance workers will suffer over the coming 130 years. The numbers are ludicrously low. The study estimated that asbestos-containing buildings accommodate some 22.5 million office workers and 369,200 custodial staff, and that the buildings have an average useful life of 60 years. Among the tens of millions of people who will revolve through these buildings, the EPA predicts that 3,300 asbestos-related fatalities will show up by the year 2118—an average of 25 deaths per year. Driving a car



Wearing disposable protective suits, cleanup workers at New York's LaGuardia Airport scrape off asbestos inch by inch.