FILE NAME: Asbestos Sacks and Bags (ASB)

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# HOUSE OF COMMONS
## OFFICIAL REPORT
*Monday, 17th April, 1967*

### Asbestos (Cancer Risks)

**Mrs. Joyce Butler** asked the Minister of Labour if he is aware of the danger to dockers from the risks of cancer from handling asbestos; and if he will make a statement.

**Mr. Gunter:** I understand that asbestos may be associated with two kinds of cancer. The first is lung cancer. This occurs more often among people who have asbestosis than it does among the general population. Asbestosis is a lung disease which is contracted through working daily over a period of months or years in fairly heavy concentrations of asbestos dust. I am informed that there is no recorded case of a docker contracting asbestosis from his work, and dockers are therefore no more likely to get lung cancer than anybody else.

It appears that asbestos is also associated with another kind of cancer called mesothelioma. This affects the covering rather than the substance of the lung. It may also affect the lining of the abdominal cavity. It is a very rare disease. Even now with all the publicity that has been given to the subject in the Medical and National Press, reports of new cases are still only coming in at the rate of less than 50 a year.

Of the new cases being reported each year, a substantial majority are thought to have had some occupational exposure to asbestos.

Three main kinds of asbestos are imported into this country. About three-quarters of it is chrysotile or white asbestos; about one-fifth is amosite or brown asbestos, and about one-twentieth is crocidolite or blue asbestos. Current evidence points to blue asbestos as being the variety most commonly associated with mesothelioma. It is impossible to be certain that the others are harmless, but the risks are certainly much less than with blue asbestos.

The chance that any individual docker will get mesothelioma is remote. This is true even with the precautions that have been taken in the past. My Department is revising the Docks Regulations to require additional precautions. In the meantime we have recommended to the producers, importers and users that asbestos of any kind should only be imported into and transported within this country if it is in dust- and fibre-proof containers. Unlined hessian sacks allow too much dust to escape. Multi-wall paper sacks may split under load. Like certain other kinds of packaging such as some kinds of polythene bag they may tear easily and so are not wholly satisfactory. Better results have been obtained by using hessian lined with or bonded to polythene or paper and other promising lines are being investigated.

We must assume that blue asbestos cannot be handled safely even in bags which are normally reasonably dust-proof. Satisfactory conditions can however be obtained if the blue asbestos is packed in dust-proof containers which are then stacked on pallets which can be handled mechanically. An even better method which in time may well be adopted for asbestos is to use container ships.

Dockers are at present only very slightly at risk of getting mesothelioma from asbestos. No one can guarantee that any process is 100 per cent. safe, but all our present knowledge suggests that if our recommendations are followed dockers should in future be at no greater risk than the rest of the population.