

ALASKA.

From Tom Hamilton

TO: R. Walsh JUN 3 1989

Ken Cohen asked me to give you
this article. I saw him at the
American Industrial Hygiene
Conference last week.

Tom 2) File

① Beltschki
- FYI



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**ASBESTOS IN BUILDINGS:
To Remove, or Not to Remove, that is THE Question?**

**(An Editorial submitted to the AMERICAN JOURNAL OF
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By
Kenneth S. Cohen, PhD, PE, CIH.
CONSULTING HEALTH SERVICES
Division of TOXOS Corporation
P.O. Box 1625
El Cajon, CA 92022
(619) 579-6233

Asbestos, once considered a primary adjunct to the fire and life safety of a building, has become the object of general concern due to its potential health affects if inhaled into the body. Time has not lessened the engineering attributes of Asbestos, but it has become a public health experience which has made it the object of public scrutiny. The mere existence of Asbestos containing materials in a building's construction, and its associated "potential risk" to human health, has often caused various levels of panic and paranoia in the buildings occupants. This engendered concern most often exists in the absence of any real or potential exposure data.

The reality of possible "hazard" to humans is, in my opinion beyond dispute, either by lay or scientific communities. The un-checked release of Asbestos containing material into building air, and subsequent generation of respirable fibers, unquestionably could create a health risk. (1) It is my considered opinion that ASBESTOS IN PLACE IS SAFE! Only when it is released into the "breathing air" does it become a hazard.

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Building owners, both public and private, have had their responsibilities regarding Asbestos containing materials made exquisitely clear by a number of legislative acts, litigations, and news media concenrations. The question of Asbestos control and abatement boils down to Removal or Retention Management with diligent monitoring. The former appears to offers a "terminal" answer which may not be fully realized for many years. The latter, offers the concern of continuing problems and an eventual need to remove the Asbestos.

With this in mind, and a naive ignorance of the variables, a building owner or school board would readily opt for removal. My concern arises when the quality of removal contractor, removal "state-of-the-art", and current contractor experiences are weighed against the risk of fiber release in the building.

My onsite experiences throughout the US have not re-enforced my confidence in either contractor ability to remove Asbestos competently or safely at the current state of our knowledge and technical ability to define "safety". Asbestos removal contractors have revealed an on-the-job learning experience done at the expense of future building occupants. What ever "learning curve" that is attained diminishes with the tranfient nature of the labor pool and supervision. This level of quality in the contractors crew tends to be only slightly elevated in those jurisdictions requiring "training".

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Quality control efforts are immediately compromised by air quality assessment techniques which if adequate are either unavailable or priced beyond the limits of practicality. Using "bureaucratic compromises" in fiber-in-air assessment, we find ourselves enjoying the security of negative results.

In light of the above considerations, the removal of Asbestos from a building should be considered a "last resort". The risk of removal deficiencies must be seriously weighed against the "relief" of having the problem gone.

Obvious deterioration of the Asbestos containing material is NOT a condition which can be ignored. These areas must be repaired, enclosed, or removed as the best available Industrial Hygiene science dictates. If removal is the only option in these areas, strict vigilance must be the keynote.

Fiber release, at levels far greater than that already existing in a subject building, is a "given" in any removal operation. The quality of a removal project is not readily discernible by today's science, and virtually invisible to the naked eye. A poorly done project can, without suspicion, leave a "lethal legacy" for the occupant generations to come.

I offer this caution to school and building owners faced with Asbestos containing materials; weigh your options carefully. Although legislated mandates strongly "suggest" removal as the ultimate solution, agencies are be-

ginning to reverse their position as experience reveals the validity of the above argument.(2) I'm sure there are some good, quality, and concerned contractors somewhere, but I've not been fortunate enough to find them. Luckily, time is on our side. The institution of an Operations and Maintenance Control program, where Asbestos containing materials are securely in place, can buy us time with which we can improve our removal and assessment science and skills. Think twice before you plunge into the pool of paranoia surrounding Asbestos mania.

REFERENCES

- (1) "ASBESTIFORM FIBERS: Nonoccupational Health Risks" Board on Toxicology and Environmental Health Hazards Commission on Life Science, National Res. Council, National Academy Press, Washington, DC 1984.
- (2) "TSCA-Bulletin" U.S.EPA December 1984.



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