

(1984 JAN. 19)

Hazard

Did you catch this in last night's paper? E.H.

OSHA probes asbestos exposure in Mellon Bank Building

By Ralph Haurwitz
The Pittsburgh Press

Employees in parts of the Mellon Bank Building, Downtown, have been exposed to airborne fibers presumed to be asbestos, company officials said.

The federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration, which is investigating the matter, strongly implied yesterday that Mellon had violated government regulations designed to protect workers.

The exposures appear to be linked to an extensive renovation under way at the 42-story Mellon Bank Building at 525 William Penn Place. As part of the renovation, asbestos — a cancer-causing mineral used, for example, on heating

pipes and ducts — is being removed. Bank officials released test results yesterday showing that employees on several floors had been working in areas with airborne fibers. The tests were done by the Pittsburgh Testing Laboratory, which was hired to monitor the air during the renovation.

Employees on two floors — the 21st and 22nd — were exposed to levels at which OSHA requires employers to provide physical examinations and other medical monitoring. About 45 Mellon employees work on the two floors.

The bank has provided no such exams, however.

In addition, Mellon said it had not equipped any of several hundred employees in the building with portable devices that measure asbestos

fibers in the air they breathe. Federal regulations require such monitoring of employees when there is a potential for asbestos exposure, said Stanley Elliott, the area director of OSHA.

Elliott stopped short of saying Mellon Bank had violated OSHA requirements, asserting that his agency's investigation was not complete, but he strongly implied that violations had occurred.

"When you are handling asbestos, you've got to do monitoring," he said. "Those standards are very explicit."

Michael Culbert, an assistant vice president in Mellon's real estate management division, said the company was deeply concerned about any asbestos reading above zero. He said its motive in having the asbestos

test removed in the first place was to assure a safe working environment. "We'll do what's necessary to make sure our employees are safe," he said.

Culbert said Mellon would consult experts to determine whether medical monitoring should be started and personal air monitors distributed.

Such a monitor consists of a portable pump that attaches to a belt, with a tube that samples the air near the wearer's face.

Culbert said the air readings were puzzling because they were fluctuating and because they were recorded in areas where renovation work had been completed.

The tests showed that fiber levels in work areas had exceeded 0.2

fibers per cubic centimeter of air. OSHA requires medical monitoring above 0.1 asbestos fibers.

Joseph Duckett, an environmental engineering consultant to Mellon, said the elevated levels had been recorded in only a few instances. He said it was presumed the fibers were asbestos, but that there was a chance they were fiberglass or some other material.

Tim Mains, a lawyer for the Allegheny County Health Department, said he also was puzzled by the readings. Mains gave high marks to Wyatt Inc., a company hired to remove the asbestos from shafts and floors that house heating and ventilation equipment.

(Ralph Haurwitz is Press ecology writer.)

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