

Death of the Asbestos Industry

now closed, in the United States; and the two so-called amphibole varieties, crocidolite and amosite, which are mostly found in the southern part of Africa.

China and the former Soviet Union also contain sizable deposits of asbestos, but they play little part in our tale. Some chrysotile asbestos will be found wherever there are outcroppings of a form of rock called serpentine, but these are not commercially useable. These outcroppings can be found in almost every state in the U.S. Practically the entire northern half of California rests on a bed of what is referred to as "crud grade" asbestos ore. While totally unusable, it is the main reason why California cities such as San Francisco and Sacramento have the highest levels of asbestos in their drinking water of essentially anyplace in the world. Rain put it there by washing it out of the ground and into the drinking water. Wind and erosion also release small but detectable quantities of asbestos into the air. It has even been found in ice samples dating back thousands of years. It is everywhere.

What made asbestos so valuable was its ability to be separated into long silky fibers that could be woven or wound into a wide variety of products; and it is practically fireproof. The word asbestos, in fact, comes from the ancient Greek and means "unquenchable," not because it wouldn't burn but because when used as wicks for oil lamps, it wouldn't go out or burn down. To this day I keep a chunk of asbestos ore on my desk. To illustrate its attributes I pull a few fibers and hold them over a cigarette lighter. Far thinner than a human hair, the fibers will glow bright red in the flame, but not burn or be consumed. It is the fineness and near indestructibility of the fibers that made asbestos so valuable, and, as it turned out, so lethal.

The first indications that there might be something amiss with the "magic mineral" arose in the years prior to the First World War in Great Britain. In the late 1940s, reports, once again from England, began appearing in the medical literature linking asbestos exposure to an elevated risk of lung cancer among heavily exposed workers, primarily in the British asbestos textile industry, where conditions were recognized to be particularly dusty. While efforts were undertaken to reduce exposures, it was not known how much asbestos was "too much."

In the United States and Canada, the industry was sufficiently alarmed by the reports crossing the Atlantic from England that it commissioned a study of lung cancer among the Quebec asbestos miners. It was assumed — incorrectly, as it later turned out — that asbestos miners would have the highest exposure of any group of asbestos workers, including the textile workers, and that if a problem were to be found, it would be found in the Quebec mines. The study, which was

Health Problems?