ASBESTOS AS A HEALTH HAZARD IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Union Carbide U.K. Limited has been promoting the sale of Coalinga asbestos for just over two years. During this time, the public has become increasingly aware of the considerable health risks associated with the use of this material. This has come about with a mixture of both good and misleading press articles, and in January, interest was accelerated by a provocative television programme in which Blue asbestos was spectacularly condemned.

So far, over 20 potential customers have raised the issue, and have requested an assurance that Carbide's material will not be a source of danger to their employees. Some have even refused to consider a laboratory evaluation until the matter becomes satisfactorily resolved. It is felt that an intensification of activity by the Factory Health Inspectors as well as potential Union objections are the prime reasons for the reluctance.

Carbide's replies have been based upon the two communications sent from New York Office on March 22nd, 1966, and October 7th, 1966, as well as Dr. Dernehl's "Asbestos Toxicology Report". These have gone part-way in alleviating some of the anxiety. However, there is a growing feeling that the quoted "Threshold Limit Value" is no longer tenable. This, coupled with the overall lack of positive knowledge, still makes the whole situation manifestly unsatisfactory. With this in mind, it was thought opportune to review the action taken to date by Union Carbide U.K., and present a survey of the information gleaned from several sources.

2.0 HISTORICAL SUMMARY

2.1 General

It is possible that public interest was initiated in Great Britain by an article in the Sunday Times (31st October, 1965) which summarised the work of Newhouse and Thompson at the London Hospital. These two workers had conducted an epidemiological survey on 83 patients admitted to the hospital over approximately 50 years. Each patient (41 male and 42 female) had positively diagnosed diffuse pleural or peritoneal mesothelioma. Evidence of exposure to asbestos was obtained in 40 of the 76 cases whose background histories could be accurately traced.

It was also in this article that the description was given of a docker's wife who died of mesothelioma, and whose only contact with asbestos had resulted from washing her husband's overalls. This example has become a cliché, and is now cited by all opponents of asbestos usage.

Factories in the U.K. are at present governed by outmoded Asbestos Regulations promulgated in 1931. Realisation that they are not entirely effective was brought about by figures published by the Ministry of Pensions and National Insurance. These show that there has been an overall decrease in the number