

Sounding Board

A Selection of Current Opinion

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Asbestos Isn't That Bad, Say Those Who Produce It

On the political front, certain politicians, especially those in cities and states where sprayed asbestos is under investigation, have launched attacks on asbestos. Many have been expressions of genuine concern for the public welfare, but others have been little more than attempts to cash in on the current interest in the environment.

Additional adverse publicity has been generated by environmentalists and consumer protection advocates such as Barry Commoner, Rene Dubos, and Ralph Nader, who frequently include asbestos in their list of alleged public-health hazards. Nader's recent utterance about the use of asbestos as a filler in cigars and cigarettes is a prime example. I might mention in regard to Nader's claims that to the best of our knowledge no asbestos is used in the manufacture of cigars or cigarettes.

Considerable publicity has been generated by doctors investigating various types of asbestos-related disease. Their comments and speeches have often been exaggerated or quoted out of context, and their opinions or theories reported as absolute fact. In other instances, these doctors themselves have spoken out without knowing the full facts of a particular situation, or have exaggerated the size of the problem in order to attract more attention.

The net result of all this publicity has

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been to foster a series of very erroneous and very damaging impressions in the public mind.

First reports indicate that the level of asbestos existing in the borough of Manhattan in New York City—probably the most heavily polluted of all American urban centers—is at a level of about one nanogram per cubic foot, and can be measured only under an electron microscope. A nanogram is one-billionth of a gram. Translating this to the levels recommended by the American Conference of Governmental and Industrial Hygienists for occupational exposure, we find that a worker employed at a recommended safe level of 5 fibers per cubic centimeter of air has an exposure at least 30,000 to 100,000 times higher than that of the average New Yorker. Putting it in even more graphic terms, a New Yorker throughout a lifetime of 70 years would be exposed to an amount of asbestos no greater than that to which an employee in an asbestos mine or plant would be exposed in 2½ working days at the recommended safe level of 5 fibers per cc.

Which brings us to the second major erroneous impression concerning asbestos:

That asbestos causes lung cancer and other disease among the general public. This erroneous impression has arisen because some doctors, writers, and others have translated the *occupational* hazard to the *general public* without considering the vast differences in the amount of exposure between the two groups. The fact is that there is no evidence, scientific or otherwise, that anyone in the general public has ever contracted any disease from exposure to the minute amounts of asbestos that exist in the community air. In years past, there may have been some potential hazards to people living in the vicinity of asbestos mines, mills, and manufacturing plants. However, as technology was developed for the control of asbestos dusts in industry and the prevention of its escape into the community air, these potential hazards disappeared.

—W. P. RAINES, secretary of the Asbestos Information Association/
North America, at a press briefing
in New York City.