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Dockers fear health peril from asbestos

By Dr Alfred Byrne
Medical Correspondent

DOCTORS and dockers employed by the Port of London Authority are in sharp disagreement over the health hazard involved in the unloading of asbestos cargoes at London Docks.

The dockers believe that present working conditions are unsafe—a view upheld by reports in the Sunday Times that a "new" and deadly tumour of the pleura can result many years after apparently brief exposure to asbestos dust.

Dr A. M. Lawrence-Smith, Principal Medical Officer of the P L A, has however made a controversial attempt to assuage their fears. In a signed statement circulated among the men he says that the Ministry of Labour arranged scientific investigations which excluded the lung disease of "asbestosis" as a risk to dock labour; that the development of the tumour associated with asbestos—known as mesothelioma—requires similar circumstances to those causing asbestosis, and that the tumour occurs only where a particular variety and grade of dust, not found in commercial cargo, is released into the air.

He has, he says, an assurance from H M Medical Inspectorate that the gangs run no risk of mesothelioma or asbestosis in handling such cargoes.

A spokesman of the Ministry of Labour, however, referred me to a letter on the findings of the Inspectorate, which has been sent to several interested parties. It reports that the concentration of air-borne dust was found to exceed the upper limits of safety when unlined hessian bags of asbestos are unloaded at the normal rate of working, and agrees that in such cases respirators should be worn.

The P L A has in fact been supplying the men with masks and overalls for use when unloading asbestos and paying them an extra 2s. an hour for their trouble.

A world authority on mesothelioma, questioned by phone in Tokyo, where he was attending a cancer congress, considered that more than one of the P L A's pronouncements on this subject did not accord with the published facts.

Dr Robert Murray, medical adviser to the Trades Union Congress, said: "This is a misleading document on several critical points. Even ephemeral exposure appears capable of causing mesothelioma. People have got it many years after playing on asbestos tips in childhood. As King Edward VII said of tuberculosis: 'If preventable why not prevent?' Crocidolite (blue asbestos) seems to be mainly responsible and it may be feasible to dispense with it entirely."

When asked to comment on his report, Dr Lawrence-Smith intimated that he did not wish to debate the matter on the phone.

Through its areas officers, the Transport and General Workers Union has advised members not to handle cargo of asbestos where it is imported in permeable bags. Since that policy has been enforced at Southampton, safer bags have become the rule. One ship was turned away unloaded from London Docks because the men refused to handle the asbestos aboard, and I understand that a firm of lightermen will not handle asbestos at all.

On the West India Docks, last Wednesday, waiting to unload the City of Exeter, out of Durban, dockers said they were "really frightened" over the risk from the dust, and would much sooner feel safe than get extra money. They complained—and probably fairly—that when a cargo is discharged the dust scatters and may involve men not concerned with the unloading. It may also settle on packages of foods going to grocers' shops.

What they unloaded was blue asbestos in unlined hessian bags labelled "G E F C O Cenbestos." One bag had burst and its contents were distributed over the others. Asbestos was gaping through holes in many more, made by the hooks which some dockers insist on using. Some of the men wore no respirator; others did so intermittently. A scientist who has tested the masks personally says it is hardly practicable to work in them for more than half-an-hour.

The solution is not merely a matter of masks but safer methods of packing and loading. That aspect of the problem is now exercising the ingenuity of doctors, scientists, and industrialists throughout the world.



Kelvin Brodie

Special masks protect dockers unloading bags of asbestos

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