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Asbestos at the docks

Sir,—I refer to the article by Dr Alfred Byrne, "Dockers Fear Health Peril from Asbestos." In the present state of scientific medical knowledge, mesothelioma should not, surely, be allowed to cause panic reactions until the fullest details regarding its distribution and causes are fully understood.

The work of our dockers, unlike that of men in asbestos production industries, is non-continuous and limited as to time and exposure to injurious substances. Dr Byrne's earlier article, to which he refers, implies quite terrifying risks even to persons handling preparations of asbestos commonly used in their own household chores. From what he has said it could appear that the danger of mesothelioma might be present on any building site or in the homes of the public where preparations such as asbestos wool-lagging are commonly used.

Although asbestos has not been regarded as having likely association with the development of mesothelioma among the dockers one is unable to say that scientific investigations still going on concerning a variety known as crocidolite might not one day show it as a noxious substance of more severe significance.

The Port of London Authority during the summer of 1965 were active in co-operating with the Ministry of Labour and others to pursue investigations and formulate measures by which any sort of risk from asbestos cargoes generally would best be tackled. On the findings and recommendations of these inquiries representations were made to the shippers to ensure new and better methods of packaging crude cargoes of asbestos coming into the country. The report produced to the parties concerned does not apparently diverge to any great extent from what was subsequently circulated by my department to Port of London Authority staff; it was concluded that such risk as there might be in this country would not amount to more for dock labourers than for other workers.

Dr Byrne's articles are of interest as containing expressions of broad scientific conjecture published where they will attract attention from many who have no access to informed and impartial opinion.

In his concluding paragraphs one is happier when noting an admission that questions of packaging and loading are in fact exercising the "ingenuity of doctors, scientists and industrialists throughout the world." Dr Byrne, however, does not give credit to the Port of London Authority for the part which they have played and are playing in this connection. Whenever questions are raised about objectionable cargoes the Authority is invariably interested to seek for and press measures by which these can be mitigated and controlled.

The Authority's health policy is directed to prevention rather than passive acceptance of unknown risks. Accident Prevention Committees, on which sit representatives of the staff, meet regularly at the docks and their questions and observations on subjects of physical accidents and possible injuries to health are regularly passed to the Authority's head office, where they are considered and advised on by members of management and of the medical department.

In conclusion, it can be said that since December, 1946, when comprehensive returns of health of all Port of London Authority staff were initiated, there is no instance of any case of asbestosis, or malignant growth of the lung attributable to asbestos, or of mesothelioma, being reported in the service.

A M Lawrence-Smith,
Medical Officer, Port of London Authority
London E C 3

Dr Alfred Byrne writes: Dr Lawrence-Smith has failed to deal with the several points in his circular to the dockers, where, I suggested, he was factually wrong. His letter is equally inaccurate if it is claiming that the P L A has removed the risk of asbestos from the docks. Moreover, I find no comfort in his assertion that no cases of mesothelioma have arisen since 1946, seeing that it takes an average of 40 years for the tumour to appear.

Fixing the rate

Sir,—We were intrigued to learn from last Sunday's article ("Dockers fear health peril from asbestos") that payment of 2s. per hour has some beneficial or preventive effect on pleural cancers from inhaled asbestos, and would appreciate information on the research which led to the fixing of a particular sum to combat the occurrence of mesothelioma.

This principle of prevention by payment could perhaps be extended to other forms of disease. Just to make sure in the case of the dockers, we would suggest that 2s. 4d. or 2s. 9½d. per hour may be even more beneficial.

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