FILE NAME: Newspaper & Magazine Articles (NMA)

DATE: 1971 May 4

DOC#: NMA053

DOCUMENT DESCRIPTION: NYT - Coats with Asbestos in Fabrics Termed Hazardous

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New York Times (1857-Current file); May 4, 1971; ProQuest Historical Newspapers The New York Times (1851 - 2002)
pg. 42

Coats With Asbestos in Fabrics Termed Hazardous

By HERBERT KOSHETZ

Consumers and workers have been exposed to a serious health hazard—including the possibility of lung cancer—from women's coats made with cloth containing asbestos fiber, an officer of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union said yesterday.

More than 100,000 of these coats were manufactured last fall and winter from a blend of wool, nylon and asbestos, said Henoch Mendelsund, a vice president of the union, and some of the cloth, with 8 per cent asbestos, is still available.

An order has gone out to union members not to cut or sew cloth containing asbestos, Mr. Mendelsund said. There is only a remote chance, however, of calling back the coats, he said, because of their widespread distribution throughout the country to women who may not be aware of the hazard.

Physician Cites Danger

At a news conference at the headquarters of the Joint Board of Cloak, Suit, Skirt and Reefer Makers' Unions, Mr. Mendelsund introduced Dr. Irving J. Selikoff, director of the Environmental Science Laboratory of the Mount Sinai School of Medicine, who brought the asbestos coat hazard to the attention of the union.

Dr. Selikoff, who also heads the division of environmental medicine at the hospital, said that once the asbestos particles are inhaled they were not expelled and they did not dissolve.

"The host may suffer no ill effects for years, but the danger of lung cancer or some other asbestos-induced malady remains," he said.

He went on to say that brushing or rubbing a sample coat made of the material produced asbestos levels in the air 10,000 times those normally present.

The hazard to clothing workers dealing with cloth containing asbestos was far greater than those to the wearer, he added, citing the high level of asbestos-induced tumors and cancer among insulation workers.

Letters of warning were sent last month to the Food and Drug Administration and Mrs. Virginia Knauer, Special Assistant to the President for Consumer Affairs, Dr. Selikoff said. So far no replies have been received.

Spokesmen for the Department of Consumer Affairs and the Department of Health here said they had no knowledge of the coats and could not comment.

Asked what a consumer should do if she discovered she owned such a coat, Dr. Selikoff said: "Bury it."

Mr. Mendelsund said that while he was confident the union could forbid workers from using material containing asbestos, government action would be required to halt the use of such materials anywhere.



The New York Times/Tyrone Bates

Henoch Mendelsund of the I.L.G.W.U. discussing coats made with asbestos at news session here yesterday. At left is Dr. Irving J. Selikoff of Mount Sinai School of Medicine.

His investigation showed that hundreds of thousands of yards of a melton-type cloth that was made up of 70 per cent wool, 22 per cent nylon and 8 per cent asbestos had been imported from Italy. One coat manufacturer, he said, had made and delivered 100,000 coats made of the materials and four or five others shipped similar coats in lesser amounts.

Makers Not Named

He said he did not want to name the manufacturers because he felt that they were unaware of the health hazard involved and he was sure they would not make additional garments.

Under the Wool Labeling Act, fiber content must be stated for any cloth or garment containing 50 per cent or more of wool. This was done on a detachable label on all the coats produced, according to Mr. Mendelsund.

He said that hopes for a lower import duty were the chief motivation for using the asbestos. In a case before the Customs Court last fall, he said, an importer had requested that a 6 per cent duty be set for asbestos material. The duty on wood goods is 60 per cent, plus 37.5 cents a pound.

Mr. Mendelsund said the Customs Court had turned down the request for the lower duty on asbestos material. If the decision stands, he said, there will be no advantage in blending asbestos into apparel fabrics.

The joint board, which has its offices at 22 West 38th Street, has jurisdiction over 40,000 women's and children's coat workers in the New York metropolitan area. They work under collective agreements with the New York Coat and Suit Association, the American Cloak and Suit Manufacturers Association and the Infants' and Children's Coat Association.

Mr. Mendelsund said that he had urged the associations to inform their members of the asbestos danger.

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