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AUGUST 1978



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Painters & Allied Trades Journal

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Local 138 members re-decorate landmark theatre in Vancouver, B.C.

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Ask The Doctors ... Bystander Exposure to Asbestos

Do you worry about the chemicals with which you have to work? Do you have symptoms of an illness which may be connected to your occupation?

"Ask the Doctors" is the JOURNAL feature designed to answer your questions about the hazards in the painting and allied trades.

This month Dr. Edwin C. Holstein of New York's Mount Sinai School of Medicine discusses the dangers of asbestos.



Two months ago, the Surgeon General of the United States sent a letter to every physician in the United States. The purpose was to alert doctors to the hazard of asbestos, particularly to past and present employees of our shipyards. Since so many painters have worked in shipyards, and still do, I thought you should know why the Surgeon General is concerned about you.

Few painters think of themselves as asbestos workers. However, when painters must work in close quarters with other tradesworkers, as often happens in shipyard work, they may be risking a *bystander* exposure. Bystander exposure was discussed more fully in the December, 1977 issue of the IBPAT Journal. Briefly, it refers to an exposure to toxic materials being used by another worker nearby, and it commonly occurs with asbestos, lead, solvents and sandblasting, to name just a few.

A team from Mt. Sinai School of Medicine went to a major United States shipyard to investigate whether bystander exposure to asbestos had occurred there among painters and other tradesworkers. (As you

may know, asbestos has been widely used in ships for insulating boilers, steam pipes, bulkheads, hot water pipes and nuclear reactors.) A total of 1,000 men, including 82 painters, received complete examinations. It was found that almost half of the workers had abnormalities of their chest x-rays characteristic of the effects of asbestos. The painters were actually a little worse off than the average—44 of the 82 painters examined, or 54 percent, had abnormalities of these kinds. Since these men had not worked with asbestos themselves, the only explanation is that they were victims of bystander exposure.

How many ex-shipyard painters are there in the country? We know that about five million people have worked in shipyards since the beginning of World War II. In 1943, about 3 percent of shipyard workers were painters. If this percentage has continued, then there have been roughly 150,000 painters employed in shipyards since the beginning of W.W. II. If we guess that one-third have died (from natural causes as well as asbestos-related diseases), that leaves about 100,000 of you out there. And if the Mt. Sinai study is accurate that about half of such men have abnormal chest x-rays, then about 50,000 living painters are already affected; and others who have been exposed may become abnormal in the future.

The reason that the Surgeon General is so concerned about this situation is that other scientific studies have shown that the health effects of asbestos exposure can be very serious. They include an enormously increased risk of lung cancer (especially among cigarette smokers), mesothelioma (cancer of the lining around the lungs or abdomen), moderately increased risk of cancer of the colon, rectum, stomach and esophagus (food-tube), and asbestosis (scarring of the lungs that leads to shortness of breath). In fact, some studies of heavily-exposed workers have shown that eventually, close to half died from one of these disorders!

For most of these diseases, the risk does not begin to increase until 15 or 20 or more years have elapsed since the asbestos exposure began. On the other hand, as little as a few months of exposure can lead to disease after the 20-year delay period has passed. For example, a painter whose only asbestos exposure occurred during a six-month stint in a shipyard in 1960 would begin to be at risk about now. And anyone who did shipyard work during W.W. II, even if only for a few months, would already have been at risk for some years now.

The point I am making is that any of you who worked in shipyards, or were exposed to asbestos in some other way, before about 1960 are already at risk for the diseases I have mentioned. If your exposure began after 1960, your risk will begin to increase 15 or 20 years from the time your exposure began.

What should you do if you have worked in a shipyard, or have been exposed in some other way? The Surgeon General strongly recommends, and I agree, that you stop smoking immediately. The reason is that asbestos hardly increases the risk of lung cancer at all among non-smokers. Secondly, you should make certain that no further exposure to asbestos is occurring in your work today. Finally, you should locate a qualified expert in occupational or pulmonary (lung) disease and have yourself checked regularly so that if any of these disorders arise, they will be detected and treated early.

Mt. Sinai is equipped and staffed to perform a thorough evaluation of this sort. If you live within a few hours of New York, and would like to be checked, drop me a postcard at the following address:

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New York, New York 10029
Be sure to include your address and phone number.

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