

FILE NAME: Ferro Engineering (FER)

DATE: 1966

DOC#: FER003

DOCUMENT DESCRIPTION: Newspaper Articles

WHIC

Even Asbestos Has Its Dangers

Asbestos, a substance used in a great variety of industrial products, can be very dangerous to people who come in contact with it.

Asbestos is a mixture of magnesium, calcium, and iron. If the fine fibers that make up the substance are inhaled, the cells of the body cannot get rid of them, and a diffuse inflammatory reaction occurs in the lungs. Ultimately, normal lung tissue is replaced by fibrous tissue—and cancer is possible.

The incidence of asbestosis, as the condition is called, is rising. This condition, with increased use of the material, in 1950, world production was 260,000 tons; today it is 1,300,000 tons a year. About 40 per cent of the workers' output is contained in this country.

The disease progresses slowly, so that we may not be seeing the results of exposure as long as 30 years ago. Experts conjecture that the rate will be much higher 30 years from now.

There are about 30,000 workers in the asbestos industry in this country, and another 3,000,000 in the construction industry, who are exposed to the material. Many others, though, can have casual but just as dangerous exposure, simply by living near an industrial or construction site.

Shortness of breath is the dominant symptom of the condition with a severity out of proportion to the apparent change in the lung tissue. Builders also are prone to tuberculosis infection. More importantly, cancer of the lungs occurs in about 13 per cent of such victims, and the death rate from cancer of the stomach, colon, and rectum is unusually high even though no one knows why these organs are affected.

Doctors also are mystified by the appearance of a rare tissue tumor, mesothelioma, which is found increasingly in asbestos victims. They do not know if it is the result of prolonged exposure, or whether a casual exposure can produce

it, too. The tumor was found in 12 of 300 workers in the industry who were examined after their deaths.

Usually the case is diagnosed by X rays of the lungs. It can be discovered also by finding "asbestos knots" in the sputum, yellow red-like structures shaped like drum sticks and consisting of an asbestos core surrounded by thick, fibrous material.

No one has discovered a method of treatment for the condition, which is considered invariably fatal. The only prevention suggested is special precautions for people occupationally exposed to asbestos, such as masks, air filtration, and improvement of environmental conditions. It is also suggested that people not ordinarily exposed to asbestos avoid any contact with the material when it is in use, as when insulation is installed in a new home.

—JOHN HANSEN, M.D.

10/17/66

SUNDAY TIMES 12th Aug 1966

Asbestos recognised —as cancer risk—

By Dr Alfred Byrne

REGULATIONS which acknowledge that occupational exposure to asbestos is causing the most important industrial cancer of our time will be introduced next week by Mrs Margaret Herriman, Minister of Social Security.

From August 22 the tumour known as mesothelioma will be scheduled as a prescribed disease, so that asbestos workers who contract it as a result of their occupation after a certain date will be eligible for industrial benefit. Mesothelioma is an unusual tumour of the pleura—covering the lung—and of similar nature lining the abdominal cavity, and is invariably fatal. Several steps are being taken towards discovering the full extent of this recently recognised disease so that measures to prevent it can be devised.

A register of all past and present cases in Britain has been set up by the Medical Research Councils. Pneumoconiosis Research Unit, directed by Dr J. G. Gibson, at Cardiff. They have added 76 new cases to their original nucleus of 120 since the Sunday Times broke the news of this epidemic on October 21, 1964. One hospital in London and another in Belfast are each admitting an average of one new case a month.

An average of 40 years usually elapses between exposure to asbestos and the appearance of the growth. Exposure for only

two or three months may cause the cancer. It can occur in asbestos workers, roofers, in mesothelioma, and relatives of asbestos workers can also catch it through inhaling asbestos fibres given off the clothing of their menfolk.

Such patients were not working with asbestos, so they will not be eligible for compensation under the Industrial Injuries Act of 1947. Incidentally, however, there are also other mesothelioma victims who are not eligible under the new regulation because they worked for a short time in the industry only before the new Act came into force.

There are three types of asbestos used commercially—chrysotile, crocidolite and amosite—whose possible hazards are now being examined in the laboratory and the field. With Dr Gibson as chairman, the International Union Against Cancer is organising a symposium on asbestos in September. Only one type of fibre is prevalent in Scotland, and it has already been shown that this tumour is more common in the neighbourhood of mines producing chrysotile than amongst the granite pits. The committee are anxious to see a similar study performed in Canada in relation to mines producing chrysotile.

Asbestos is now used to make gutters, roofing tiles, brake linings and numerous other things not envisaged when the risk of asbestos was first realised.

Copy to
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12/7/66