

VIII. OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH RISKS

Although asbestos has been known from the remotest ages - and even diseases of the respiratory system in slaves working in asbestos textures - the link between specific diseases and exposure to asbestos became established with the expansive growth in the use of this mineral and its products in the 20th century. The UK possessed - and possesses - a large asbestos-industry, starting around 1870 in the manufacture of asbestos-textile. So the first case of asbestosis was described in England in 1906; in the course of the following years the link between intensive occupational exposure and harmful effects could be firmly established. The British government took the first measures to protect the workers in these industries around 1930.

In the meantime asbestos was being used in more and more applications other than asbestos-textile: insulation, asbestos-cement, etc. (see chapter II). Exposure to asbestos inside the factories became greatly diminished by technical devices; however outside factories exposure of workers increased with the growth of applications of asbestos and asbestos-products, e.g. building trade, insulation.

In 1935 the first descriptions of bronchial carcinoma as a complication of asbestosis appeared, afterwards confirmed by other observations of this combination. It must be kept in mind, that in those years bronchial cancer was an uncommon disease. Exposure to asbestos, particularly in combination with cigarette-smoking, may cause a steep rise in the incidence of bronchial cancers.

In the 1950's the first observations of an association between asbestos and mesothelioma were published. Up till then mesothelioma was looked upon as an extremely rare disease. Since this publication a multitude of reports followed, linking mesothelioma to occupational or neighbourhood exposure to asbestos in the past - mostly occupational.

In the 1960's an excess incidence of cancer of the gastrointestinal tract

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