

Air Hygiene Foundation

The **Air Hygiene Foundation** (also known as the **Industrial Hygiene Foundation** and the **Industrial Health Foundation**) was created by industrialists in 1936 to allay public concern about silicosis, an often-fatal lung disease caused when workers inhaled silica dust.

History

In 1935, the U.S. Congress held hearings into the Hawk's Nest disaster, a major public scandal involving the deaths of up to 2,000 workers during construction of a Union Carbide hydroelectric plant. In the mid-1930s, silicosis was regarded as the "king of occupational diseases," as well known and notorious as asbestosis would become in the 1990s. The Hawk's Nest disaster even became the theme of the blues song, "Silicosis is killin' me" by Pinewood Tom (Josh White).

Less than a week after the Hawk's Nest hearings adjourned in Congress, a group of industrialists met privately at the Mellon Institute, a foundation that had been established by financiers Andrew and Richard Mellon in 1913 to "benefit American manufacturers through the practical cooperation of science and industry." The meeting led to the formation of a new organization, headquartered at Mellon, called the Air Hygiene Foundation (AHF). "Because of recent misleading publicity about silicosis and the appointment of a Congressional committee to hold public hearings," noted a confidential Mellon report, "the attention of much of the entire country has been focused on silicosis. It is more than probable that this publicity will result in a flood of claims, whether justified or unjustified, and will tend toward improperly considered proposals for legislation." To fend off these feared laws and lawsuits, the Air Hygiene Foundation planned a public relations campaign that purported to "give everyone concerned an undistorted picture of the subject."

Leading scientists and public officials were appointed to serve as members and trustees of the foundation. Its spokesmen began to be widely quoted in popular trade publications. "Silicotics are rare compared with men driven from their jobs by shyster lawyers," commented AHF representative Alfred C. Hirth. The AHF's own "shyster lawyer," Theodore C. Waters, accused doctors of fabricating claims of silicosis. "In many instances," he stated, "employees have been advised by physicians, untrained and inexperienced in the diagnosis and effect of silicosis, that they have the disease and thereby have sustained liability. Acting on this advice, the employee, now concerned about his condition, leaves his employment, even though that trade may be the only one in which he is able to earn a living."

Companies did finally begin to limit the worst abuses, improving ventilation, wetting down the dust, offering respiratory masks, and using other methods to reduce silica exposures. Gross slaughters like Hawk's Nest were easily preventable, and they generated headlines that were bad for business. Businesses were also aware of their increasing financial liability due to lawsuits. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the legal system was heavily biased to prevent workers from successfully suing their employers. By the 1930s, however, courts had become increasingly willing to hold employers liable for both actual and punitive damages. Driven by rising jury awards and insurance awards, the "dusty trades" took their problem out of the courts by convincing state governments to incorporate silicosis into state workers' compensation schedules.

With the Air Hygiene Foundation, industry had found an effective propaganda formula: a combination of partial reforms with reassuring "scientific" rhetoric, under the aegis of an organization with a benevolent, independent-sounding name. Even though the AHF was governed by and for the dusty trades, it had successfully become a vehicle for deployment of the "third party" technique. "A survey report from an outside, independent agency carries more weight in court or before a compensation commission than does a report prepared by your own people," explained AHF membership committee chairman C. E. Ralston at the foundation's fifth annual meeting.

By 1940, the AHF had 225 member companies, representing such major polluters of the day as American Smelting and Refining, Johns-Manville, United States Steel, Union Carbide, and PPG Industries. In 1941, it changed its name to the Industrial Hygiene Foundation (and later still to the Industrial Health Foundation, or IHF), broadening its agenda beyond dust-related diseases to encompass other industrial health issues. By the 1970s, it had more than 400 corporate sponsors, including Gulf Oil, Ford Motor Company, General Motors, Standard Oil of New Jersey, Kawecki Berylco Industries, Brush Beryllium, Consolidated Coal, Boeing, General Electric, General Mills, Goodyear, Western Electric, Owens-Corning Fiberglass, Mobil Oil, and Dow Chemical.

Thanks in large measure to the work of the AHF, silicosis began to fade from the headlines by the end of the 1930s. In their book, *Deadly Dust*, Professors Gerald Markowitz and David Rosner note that by the 1940s, industry health analysts declared silicosis a "disease of the past," and by the 1950s, it was "officially declared unimportant, and those who spoke about it found it necessary to apologize for 'bringing up such a shopworn, dusty topic.'" Its disappearance from the headlines is arguably an even bigger scandal than the coverup at

Hawk's Nest, because the disease itself has not been eliminated, even though its cause is well understood and avoidable. In England and other parts of Europe, a ban on sandblasting has been in place since 1949. In the United States, however, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) currently estimates that a million U.S. workers are at risk of developing silicosis, of whom 100,000 are in high-risk occupations - such as miners, sandblasters, rock drillers, pottery and mason workers, roof bolters, and foundry workers. NIOSH estimates that 59,000 of these workers will develop adverse health effects from silica exposure.

"Despite years of assurance that silicosis was a disease of the past and that workers could be adequately protected through proper ventilation, substitution of non-silica abrasives such as steel shot or garnite, and protective equipment, the reality is that during the postwar years workers continued to be exposed to excess amounts of silica and that silicosis never really vanished," write Rosner and Markowitz. "However, it is virtually impossible to develop reliable statistics concerning its prevalence in the decades following World War II given the general complacency of industry and the industrial hygiene and medical communities regarding this disease and the fact that silicosis was often not listed on death certificates as a cause of death or contributing factor. In general, doctors were neither trained to diagnose this disease nor given reason to suspect its prevalence among industrial workers."

Over the years, the AHF, known today as the IHF, has developed into something more than a mere front group. Today it provides industrial hygiene personnel to supplement the staff of member industrial groups on a paid consultant basis. IHF consultants conduct training courses in occupational health, visit company plants to review industrial hygiene, safety, and health conditions, and conduct analyses to tell companies whether they are in compliance with Occupational Safety and Health Administration regulations. It also publishes *Industrial Hygiene Digest*, a monthly journal containing abstracts of literature on occupational health and safety, technical bulletins, and the proceedings of symposia on topics of concern to occupational health and safety personnel.

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Related Resources

- Marie H. Bias-Jones, "For Survivors of the Hawk's Nest Tunnel, It Was Just a Job," *Charleston Gazette*, August 7, 1996.
- David Rosner and Gerald Markowitz, *Deadly Dust: Silicosis and the Politics of Occupational Disease in Twentieth Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991).
- David Rosner and Gerald Markowitz, *Dying for Work: Dying for Work: Workers' Safety and Health in Twentieth-Century America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987).
- David Rosner and Gerald Markowitz, "The Reawakening of National Concern About Silicosis," *Public Health Reports*, vol. 113, no. 4 (July 17, 1998).
- Jim Morris, "Silicosis: A Slow Death," *Houston Chronicle*, August 9, 1992.
- Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber, *Trust Us, We're Experts: How Industry Manipulates Science and Gambles With Your Future* (New York, NY: Tarcher Putnam, 2002).
- [Health Information Resource Database](http://www.health.gov/NHIC/NHICScripts/Entry.cfm?HRCODE=HR0346) (<http://www.health.gov/NHIC/NHICScripts/Entry.cfm?HRCODE=HR0346>), National Health Information Center, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.