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ASBESTOS AND HEALTH - A PROBLEM FOR EUROPE?

This was the title of a one day Conference held in London on November 13th, organized by the ASBESTOS INFORMATION COMMITTEE (1.) for an invited audience. The delegates were chosen from companies selling asbestos or buying asbestos for use in products for subsequent re-sale, and the author attended on behalf of the Foseco group. There were no representatives from the Press or from the ultimate user industries. Approximately 97% of the delegates were from companies concerned with the direct marketing of asbestos fibre, with a breakdown by major countries as follows :-

Austria (1), Belgium (4), Denmark (2), Finland (1), France (7), Germany (16), Holland (5), Italy (4), Spain (7), Sweden (2), U.S.A. (1) and U.K. (21).

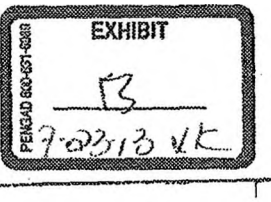
The objective of the Conference was stated by the Chairman in his opening remarks (2)....."to discuss the facts relating asbestos and health, especially in the light of recent un-informed and over sensationalised comments in the Press and on television. This problem and its effect on the marketing of asbestos fibres has occurred first in the U.K., but there is no doubt that similar pressure will soon be exerted in other countries."

A summary of the significant points from the papers and discussions (2) is given below:

1. Medical Aspects

Reported cases of asbestosis in the U.K. have risen steadily up to 1967 (167 cases), but dropped for the first time in 1968 to 148 cases. The rate of increase is in no way proportional to the usage of the material which has increased approximately ten times since 1930.

Since this date, when the first legislation was introduced about dust extraction equipment, the number of cases within the handling and weaving industries themselves has dropped very considerably, but the number of cases arising in the insulation industry has increased.



There is a fair weight of evidence to show that blue asbestos (Crocidolite) is more hazardous than the white form (Amosite and Chrysotile). Also, nearly all hazards can be eliminated by good dust control and extraction machinery. In any working area the extent of the hazard is related to the quantity of fibres in a given volume of air, to a scale as follows :-

Level	Fibres/cm^3	Action
Negligible	0 - 0.4	No need to do anything.
Low	0.5 - 1.9	
Medium	2.0 - 10.0	Dust control necessary.
High	> 10.0	Full respiratory units must be worn.

In 1957, the ASBESTOSIS RESEARCH COUNCIL (C) was formed, publishing codes of practice and working with Government Departments in drawing up new legislation etc. A new Act of Parliament will be issued in May 1970, the first draft having been significantly revised by discussions with the Council.

The Council has set up various Environmental Study Groups to look into special industry sectors - viz. Building and Shipbuilding, Electrical and Engineering, Dock Handling, Textile Weaving.

(N.B. I asked the Chairman of the Environmental Control Committee, privately, if any study was planned for the Steelworks Industry. He said "No", and was apparently quite unaware that asbestos occurred in steelworks at all).

In general, British legislation and health regulations are considerably more advanced than those in any other country.

2. Publicity and Public Relations

Starting in 1966, there have been increasingly sensational disclosures by the British Press on the health hazards of asbestos, culminating in a highly provocative television programme by the B.B.C. To counter this on behalf of the U.K. asbestos industry, the Asbestos Information Committee was formed in 1966, who employed a professional public relations firm to assure the public and publish factual information on the problem.

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3. The European Situation

One speaker summarised the situation as being one of "uneasy calm on the part of Governments and Industry". So far there has not been widespread Press coverage as in the U.K., but it is significant that the first "scares" in England originated in the docks, in view of recent happenings in HOLLAND.

A certain Dr. Stumphius (?) associated with the Rotterdam Docks, wrote a very good and unbiased technical report early in 1969 on the health risks of asbestos. He then gave a rather sensationalised press conference, which was given prominent reporting by a "responsible" Rotterdam newspaper. Perhaps stimulated by this, a further medical report is now being prepared for circulation throughout the O.E.C.D. All this has triggered off medical interest in FRANCE, and doctors are starting to look deliberately for Mesothelioma tumours in asbestos workers. There is also a plan to set up a special research unit similar in function to the Asbestosis Research Council.

4. Conclusions

There are health risks associated with the handling and use of Asbestos, particularly Blue Asbestos, nearly all of which can be eliminated or strictly reduced by sensible and responsible precautions on the part of management and individual workers. The awareness of this and the importance attached to it in other countries will depend most likely on the activities of the Press and television companies, but if the U.K. is anything to go by, this can have an effect far beyond that justified on medical evidence alone. It may or may not erupt in Europe (or elsewhere) and the Chairman closed by advising asbestos suppliers in Europe to form a "counter publicity" unit such as the Asbestos Information Committee in U.K.

J.K. MACNAIR
(Product Manager : Reading Systems)
Steelworks Division

NOTES

A. Asbestos Information Committee. Formed in 1966 by a syndicate of the three major U.K. asbestos suppliers, e.g. Cape Asbestos Ltd., Turner and Newall Ltd and the Central Asbestos Co. Ltd. They employ Messrs. Hill and Knowlton (U.K.) Ltd as Public Relations advisors.

B. The proceedings on the Conference will be published in English only. They will not now be available until January 31st, 1970.

C. The Asbestosis Research Council was set up by the U.K. Asbestos industry in 1957, with the object of sponsoring medical research and publishing data and findings etc. It works closely with Government departments but is not directly subsidised or supported by the Government.

Conference Chairman
Mr. G. S. Sutcliffe, Chairman,
The Asbestos Information Committee

Louis Room,
Café Royal, Regent Street, London W.1.
Thursday 13th November 1969

"Asbestos and health - a problem for Europe?"

09:15 — 09:45	Delegate enrolment	
10:00 — 10:15	Introduction	Mr. G. S. Sutcliffe
10:15 — 10:45	The Medical Background	Dr. W. J. Smither, Medical Consultant, Asbestosis Research Council
10:45 — 11:05	Discussion	
11:05 — 11:30	Coffee	
11:30 — 12:15	British Legislation and the Industry's Response	Dr. S. Holmes, Secretary, Asbestosis Research Council Mr. A. A. Cross, Chairman, Environmental Control Committee, Asbestosis Research Council
12:15 — 12:45	Discussion	
12:45 — 14:15	Elysee Room, Café Royal Refreshments and Luncheon	
14:15 — 15:00	Handling the Public Relations Problem	Mr. W. P. Howard, Secretary, The Asbestos Information Committee Mr. C. H. Mann, Vice-Chairman, Hill and Knowlton (UK) Ltd.
15:00 — 15:45	Discussion	
15:45 — 16:15	Tea	
16:15 — 16:45	The Situation in Europe	Mr. M. F. Howe, Deputy Chairman, The Asbestos Information Committee
16:45 — 17:15	Final Discussion Period	
17:15 — 17:30	Final Comment and Summary	Mr. G. S. Sutcliffe
20:00 for 20:30	The Asbestos Information Committee Dinner, The Ballroom, Claridge's, Brook Street, London W.1.	

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