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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, organised by the ASBESTOS INFORMATION COMMITTEE (A.) 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 (1), U.S.A. (1) and U.K. (21).

The objective of the Conference was stated by the Chairman in his opening remarks (B)....."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 (B) 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.