

ASBESTOS:



The Silent Killer

By MICHAEL O'MALLEY
Journal Staff Writer

BILL HAMILTON was bursting with energy that afternoon, two years ago, when he won the trophy in a Castalia cross-country jogging marathon. He never smoked, always watched his eating habits and ran six miles a day — not the usual track record for a man who died last week of a chronic lung disease.

Bill Hamilton's real name is being withheld. His wife has requested anonymity during the proceedings of a lawsuit she filed against a group of asbestos manufacturers. She believes their products are responsible for her husband's death.

Hamilton began his career as a maintenance engineer at the Ford's Sandusky Parts Plant in the mid 1950s. Asbestos workers, at that time, were insulating the boiler breaching and heating pipes in the power house with asbestos cement and asbestos block insulation.

As the workers mixed the cement and cut the blocks, a great amount of dust was released into the air. One former co-worker, whose name has been withheld on request, said "the entire work area looked like it was covered with goose feathers. At times the dust on the floor was two feet thick."

It was sometime between those days of construction and two years ago that a cluster of tiny serpentine fibers penetrated his lung wall. The fibers, in the form of asbestos dust, caused an irreversible cancer in the pleural membrane lining his chest cavity.

At the age of 49, Hamilton had to accept the fact that he wouldn't live to see his next birthday. For

the past month, his wife and three children had to stand by and watch him grapple with a fatal disease called mesothelioma, caused by the inhalation of asbestos fibers.

"We were at the point of our lives when we were just beginning to enjoy each other," says Mrs. Hamilton. "The kids were raised and he had only seven more years until retirement. Sometimes I wish he had been hit by a truck. It's so hard to see someone you love dying."

The story of this family's experience is not uncommon. Robert Sweeney, a Cleveland lawyer, writes in "Trial" magazine: "The tragic story of the epidemic of asbestos dust in the United States is just now unfolding. What we are looking at is Act 1, scene 1 of a health tragedy that could have been avoided." Sweeney and State Representative Leonard Camera (D-Lorain) have drafted and introduced legislation against what they believe is a hazard that has reached epidemic proportions.

Asbestos is the name for a natural group of fibrous minerals which are extremely durable against heat and friction. Such properties make the material useful in the construction industry. Asbestos products include various forms of insulation, floor and ceiling tiles, some paints, putties, twine, webbing and many other building materials. About seventy-five percent of all the asbestos in this country is used in construction.

Asbestos is often found in common household items. Hair dryers, pot holders, ironing board covers, drapes, rugs and flower pots are some products of the fiber. What has been called the "miracle fiber" is estimated to have about

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Asbestos Dilemma: Is Cost Worth Death on the Job?

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1,000 uses in everyday life.

It is also widely used in the automotive industry. Out of 40,000 tons of asbestos (fiber used annually in the United States, 118 million pounds are used to produce brake shoes while 4.5 million pounds are incorporated into clutch facings.

Once an asbestos product is cut, torn or damaged, microscopic fibers are released into the atmosphere which, according to medical specialists, can be dangerous and even fatal if inhaled or ingested.

The Johns-Manville Corporation, one of the defendants in the lawsuit filed by Mrs. Hamilton, is the country's largest importer and manufacturer of asbestos materials. Their products have been under constant attack by government agencies and medical authorities who cite the hazards of using the substance.

Encouraged by the research of Irving Selikoff, at New York's Mt. Sinai Hospital, The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), took steps to control asbestos dust in work areas. Selikoff had shown undeniable evidence that workers exposed to asbestos fibers were highly susceptible to either asbestosis, a non-malignant scarring of the lungs, or pleural mesothelioma — a fatal disease which usually kills victims within one year.

The results of Selikoff's research were made public in the early 1960's. But evidence is shown through internal corporate documents that the asbestos industry was well aware of the problem long before this time.

That awareness, and the possibility of an industrial cover-up has led Congressman George Miller (D-Calif.) to introduce

asbestosis in "Asbestos" at present.

Bill Hamilton's wife is well aware of the possibilities of an industrial cover-up. She filed a lawsuit against the asbestos industry, not only for loss of income, but for the fact that "they (the industry) knew of this (health hazard) before my husband was in junior high school."

Mrs. Hamilton's nights were interrupted by her husband's cries for morphine (100 milligrams every hour) to ease his pain and she had to sell some property to pay for medical costs.

The Ford Motor Company refused to forward her husband's workman's compensation claim to the state. The company's attorneys — Squire, Sanders and Dempsey, of Cleveland, have said: "Employer denies that claimant has contracted a mesothelioma in the course of his employment; denies that claimant was exposed to airborne asbestos sufficient to cause such condition during the course of employment; denies that mesothelioma constitutes an occupational disease; and denies that claimant is totally disabled because of any such alleged occupational disease."

However, there are other professional opinions:

—The final pathological diagnosis from Dr. Muzaffar Ahmad at the Cleveland Clinic was "malignant mesothelioma."

—In May of 1979, Hamilton was sent to St. Joseph Hospital, Lorain — where the late Dr. Thomas Sillago, Medical Director of the Hospice Unit, also diagnosed the case as "metastatic mesothelioma of the right lung with severe chronic pain."

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said they were aware of the problem and it will be corrected.

An inspector from OSHA, Doug McKee, said: "Ford is very safety conscious. They aren't one of our

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ious to share in the responsibility of the problem."

In December, 1978, NIOSH established asbestos dust standards in industrial work places. One year later, due to Selikoff's research, the agency lowered the acceptable limit of fibers per cubic centimeter of air.

Henry B. Moreno, Johns-Manville's senior operating vice-president said: "It is obvious that the overall effect of lowering the present (standard) to two fibers per cubic centimeter would have a very substantial effect on our nation's economy."

Even though the government's dust standards were lowered, Selikoff claimed the monitoring techniques did not detect the millions of smaller microscopic fibers that were just as harmful. He calculated that the average asbestos worker breathed in around four billion fibers a day. Selikoff has said there is no safe level of asbestos dust exposure.

Safe levels or not, in 1954 no one ever heard of dust standards or NIOSH. That's the year Woody Thompson started working at the Cleveland Ford plant. Thompson's job was to weld cracks and defects in red hot engine blocks as they came along a conveyor from a big furnace. The workers used four feet by four foot sheets of asbestos as protective heat shields. The cutting of these sheets released a flurry of fibers into the air.

For 21 years Thompson punched the time clock at the command of the foundry whistle, bearing the heat and the dusty conditions, not knowing that every evening he would carry home millions of tiny sharp fibers in his lungs — fibers which were slowly but surely making their way into his blood.

In 1977 his wife Roccia noticed he

1000 workers in the Electric Boat Works in Groton, Connecticut. Fifty percent of all the shipyard's construction workers showed abnormal X-rays relating to asbestos exposure. Seventy-five percent of the shipyard's electricians showed abnormalities, the highest rate.

In August, 1979, pulmonary specialists were commissioned by the Shipbuilders union in Baltimore to examine the men at the Bethlehem Steel's shipyard. More than eighty-six percent of all the workers' showed signs of asbestos-caused lung damage.

Dr. A.J. Novello of Lorain, brought the problem to the attention of AmShip Division of the American Ship Co. but was assured that there was no reason for alarm because the company no longer used asbestos products in ship building.

However, Paul Blanchette, president of the Bolinmakers Local said asbestos is a hazard in repair work. When an older ship is converted from a turbine to a diesel, a lot of asbestos dust is released when the old boiler is torn out.

A spokesman for the Lorain shipyard, said an ad hoc committee of the National Shipbuilders Council met in January of 1979 to discuss the asbestos dust in the work area and to L. up into focus the danger of exposure on past and present employees. When asked what is being done about notifying past employees who may have lung damage, the spokesman said "...you can't do anything about the past; they're already exposed."

The vice-president of AmShip, Ralph Whitaker said "there is no problem" because asbestos is no longer used in the Lorain ship yards. And if the workers in the

PLAINTIFF'S EXHIBIT

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That awareness, and the possibility of an industrial cover-up has led Congressman George Miller (D-Calif.) to introduce legislation establishing criminal penalties for corporate officials who knowingly conceal information about health and safety hazards.

Miller's bill is an outgrowth of a one-year investigation into the asbestos industry. Miller has uncovered hundreds of documents that have revealed "a legacy of four decades of cover-up which have resulted in the exposure of millions of people to cancer-causing asbestos materials."

Miller is referring to letters that show the reaction of the industry to a series of studies on asbestos that were conducted during the early 1930's.

One such letter was sent by Vandiver Brown, attorney for Johns-Manville, to research scientist Dr. Anthony J. Lanza, a medical officer with the Metropolitan Insurance Co.

The letter, dated 1932 read, in part: "... all we ask are favorable aspects be included, none of the unfavorable be unintentionally pictured in darker tones than the circumstances justify. ... I feel confident you will give us this break."

A 1939 letter from the editor of the trade journal "Asbestos" to the president of Raybestos-Manhattan, an asbestos company, read as follows: "... the information you give as to your Kenanac (New York) investigation is most interesting. Of course we understand that all this information on asbestos is being put into the hands of the public."

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However, there are other professional opinions:

—The final pathological diagnosis from Dr. Muzaffar Ahmad at the Cleveland Clinic was "malignant mesothelioma."

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—And finally, Dr. D.C. Zaworski who is the current acting Medical Director of the Hospice Unit has reviewed and summarized Stillego's final diagnosis:

"In view of his acute exposure to asbestos materials 20 years ago and his chronic exposure on at least a yearly basis since that time, it seems to be no question as to the causal relationship between his exposure to the asbestos and his current malignant mesothelioma. The medical literature supports this finding since there is no other apparent cause of the mesothelioma that has been identified."

The Sandusky Ford plant manager, Joe Carney, "can't believe the doctor's statement," and further commented: "I hope the newspaper won't print anything without the facts."

An industrial relations official, Ron Each, of that company said he doesn't "know the particulars" of the case but acknowledged that the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) had cited the company with ten violations of improper handling and use of asbestos. Six violations pertained to the use of faulty respirators and four violations were for failing to properly contain and label asbestos waste and debris.

When asked whether or not the employer (Hamilton) had been exposed to asbestos dust while working at the Sandusky Ford plant, a public relations official said: "We don't know of any asbestos exposure at the Sandusky Ford plant."



said they were aware of the problem and it will be corrected.

An inspector from OSHA, Doug McKee, said: "Ford is very safety conscious. They aren't one of our usual violators."

In response to the apparent contradiction between such medical diagnoses and corporate denial of responsibility, Representative Camera has begun a crusade on behalf of families who have suffered from health hazards in the construction industry. Camera has cited overwhelming medical proof that asbestos causes cancer and that mesothelioma is a latent disease. "In other words," said Camera, "a person who is suffering from an asbestos-related cancer today could have been exposed to the fibers 20 or 30 years ago."

Camera's proposed legislation calls for a revision of state product liability laws. Presently, under the Ohio revised code, the plaintiff may file a lawsuit against an asbestos manufacturer for bodily injury two years after the exposure.

However, because of the latency period of the disease, Camera wants to change this statute of limitations to two years from the time "the plaintiff is informed by competent medical authority that he has been injured by such exposure, or upon the date on which, by the exercise of reasonable diligence, he should have become aware that he had been injured by the exposure, whichever date occurs first." He admits his bill is an uphill battle because of the industry's strong lobby.

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Asbestos, however, is appealing to industry for many reasons.

John Welsh, a spokesman for the Asbestos Cement Pipe Producers Association says: "Let's face it. We're in the midst of an energy crisis. Asbestos is the most cost-effective material in the marketplace, and there are no viable substitutes. We're generally bullish on the future."

The industry has been able to sustain this "bullish" attitude by citing all the positive sides of their product. Because of its flame retarding nature, it has been widely used for fire prevention in public buildings.

And since asbestos was widely used in the construction of U.S. Navy battleships during World War II, Neal Amarino, a public relations representative for Johns-Manville said: "these ships saved many American lives."

As to the current problem of manufacturing a controversial product, Amarino says "Johns-Manville has invented and implemented various kinds of dust controls to meet OSHA standards. And if people accuse us of shirking our responsibility to compensate for the workers who have been exposed, then they must also accuse the U.S. Navy who prescribed the materials and packaging during war production."

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Safe levels or not, in 1954 no one ever heard of dust standards or NIOSH.

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For 23 years Thompson punched the time clock at the command of the foundry whistle, bearing the heat and the dusty conditions, not knowing that every evening he would carry home millions of tiny sharp fibers in his lungs — fibers which were slowly butchering his insides.

In 1977 his wife Beadie noticed he was continually having shortness of breath, along with a hacking cough. "I noticed it when he was remodeling our kitchen and I kept at him to go to a doctor."

When Thompson checked into the Cleveland Clinic in April, he stood 5 ft 11 in. and weighed 210 lbs. "He was solid muscle," says his wife. "But then he started to rapidly lose weight." Eight months later, Thompson was dead. Dr. Lawrence K. Groves at the Clinic diagnosed the death as pleural mesothelioma, caused by asbestos fibers.

Yet, "the miracle fiber" is not exclusively the scourge of the construction worker.

In the spring of 1979, Betty Green, of South Bend, Ind., a 4-year-old mother of six children died of pleural mesothelioma. She never handled the fiber in her life but her husband, an asbestos worker, carried the fatal dust home on his work clothes. Whenever she did his laundry or swept out the family car, she came in contact with a low concentration of asbestos — just enough to kill her.

Because a great amount of asbestos was used during World War II, primarily in U.S. Naval and private shipyards, approximately 4.5 million men and women were exposed to the substance. Some of them may be the victims of asbestos-related diseases.

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The vice-president of Armship, Ralph Whitaker said "there is no problem" because asbestos is no longer used in the Lorain ship yards. And if the workers in the past were exposed, he would have no way of knowing because "most of the asbestos work was done by outside contractors."

Leo Gorie, a former business agent for the Asbestos Workers Union in northern Ohio, has worked with asbestos since 1947. He knows the nature of the fiber and what it can do to the delicate lungs of a human being. Although, he has a mild case of asbestosis, he considers himself luckier than many of his former co-workers like George Malony who died at age forty-eight and Ed Moran of Avon Lake who died at age sixty. Both men installed asbestos insulation in the Lorain shipyards, the CEI powerhouse in Avon Lake, St. Joseph Hospital, Lorain City Hall and the Ford plant. Both men died of asbestos-related diseases.

Gorie calls the industry unrestrained, irresponsible, and charges it with the "sin of omission."

"The auto-industry will recall one of their products if it is a hazard to the public," Gorie said. "But Johns-Manville never issued a recall or a warning when they had knowledge that their product caused cancer. ... If you can't recall, you can at least forewarn."

Gorie questions why a company is allowed to market a product without knowing what affect it may have on the public. "Common sense tells us that we shouldn't have to wait 40 years to confirm scientific research while people are dying of cancer."