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General  
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## REVIEW &amp; OUTLOOK

## Puncturing a Panic

The long-running scare over asbestos is turning out to be the "War of the Worlds" of environmental panics. As with Orson Welles's famous scary radio broadcast, the asbestos panic has been whipped up by endless evening news reports about how the nation's schools were cancer traps. A group of specialists on asbestos and disease gathered at Harvard recently and their report concluded what most serious scientists already knew: "Using conservative (pessimistic) assumptions, mesothelioma and lung-cancer risk projections from exposures to indoor asbestos for school-age children and the general population were generally agreed by all the symposium participants to be quite small."

The cost, however, has been quite large. According to Kate Herber, legislative counsel for the National School Board Association, asbestos-removal costs could for elementary and secondary schools be as high as \$6 billion. This figure is only the removal costs for 671 of the more than 15,000 public-school districts around the country who answered a survey.

The cost of compliance of just the surveyed schools from fiscal 1986 to fiscal 1990 will approach \$464 million. "A lot of that money that used to go to educational programs is now going to comply with EPA regulations," says Ms. Herber.

According to the Harvard report, the average levels of airborne asbestos in buildings where the asbestos is intact are "extremely low," and it suggests that the emphasis should be on maintenance of asbestos, since removal, if improperly done, usually is more dangerous than just leaving it alone. The report goes on to say that cigarette smoke or radon pose a much greater risk than in-place asbestos. Interestingly, the report shares the school boards' concern that what the symposium called "fiber phobia" may be diverting money from other pressing needs. One that springs to mind is the schools' war on drugs.

If there is an architect of this expensive public-policy fiasco it is Democratic Congressman Jim Florio of New Jersey. Mr. Florio was the principal sponsor of the Asbestos Hazard Emergency Response Act of 1986, which mandates that schools inspect their buildings for asbestos and take appropriate action. The principal effect of the Florio bill, of course, has been to publicize its flawed premise—

that asbestos in buildings is a significant cancer threat. It simply isn't.

For reasons of its own, the Environmental Protection Agency hasn't made much effort to put the asbestos issue into proper scientific perspective, even in the wake of the Harvard report. Charles Elkins, an EPA spokesman, says that the findings of the Harvard report is a position "we've taken for a good number of years." This surely is news to a lot of private and public schools that have torn apart their budgets to satisfy the asbestos mandates.

Indeed, the politicians' phobia over asbestos continues. New York City, for instance, is considering a removal law. The costs would be prohibitive. According to a spokesman for the World Trade Center, removal costs would be \$300 million to \$350 million for just the trade center.

The one group that might conceivably be at some risk from asbestos is workers, such as plumbers or electricians, who might spend time around asbestos that's being dislodged. But the Occupational Safety and Health Administration imposes regulations that, though stringent, concede the relative harmlessness of casual exposure to most asbestos.

In 1986, OSHA issued revised standards that said that "countless maintenance operations involving the handling of asbestos-containing materials are conducted . . . and these operations, which are small in scale and of short duration, are vastly dissimilar in degree of hazard to many other asbestos-related construction operations, such as asbestos-abatement projects." In other words, if anyone's in danger, it is people around projects that are tearing out asbestos.

Despite all this, Rep. Florio now wants to extend his law to all private and public buildings and has introduced an amendment to the 1986 act. Some of his colleagues, however, have received an earful from their local school boards, and Congress has hired a consultant to do a two- to three-year study of the potential effects of the bill. After these accomplishments, Mr. Florio is pursuing the current logic of upward mobility in American politics; he's running for the governorship of New Jersey.

The asbestos story is an archetype of how in our time negligible health hazards are blown up into plague-sized problems. Scientists are starting to use a phrase to describe the politicians' response: too much money chasing too little risk.

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