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**ASBESTOS--HOW DO YOU PEOPLE-PROOF AGAINST SUCH AN OMNIPRESENT HEALTH HAZARD?** "The new technological man carries strontium-90 in his bones, iodine-131 in his thyroid, DDT in his fat, and asbestos in his lungs."

When Dr. Barry Commoner first made that now-famous environmental assessment, we didn't quite appreciate the place of asbestos in such fast company. Now we do, and we almost wish we didn't. For the presence in the air of asbestos fibres by the uncountable trillions constitutes a particularly ghastly health menace.

What's it doing in the air? As usual, it's there to endanger people because it is the essential ingredient in a process designed to protect them. Asbestos fibres are sprayed on steel members in new construction to fireproof them. And they can be lethal. If you inhale an inordinate amount of asbestos for a sufficient period, you become susceptible to mesothelioma, a sure-fatal form of cancer of the outer lining of the lung. Some evidence suggests that asbestos particles, when combined with a gaseous pollutant, trigger a synergystic effect. For example, an insulation worker who also is a cigaret smoker is 92 times more likely to develop lung cancer than the general population.

Most spraying regulations are aimed at prohibiting all visible emissions of asbestos from construction sites. And that's the devil of it. Because very fine particles, invisible to the human eye and difficult to detect with instruments, fill the air. Moreover, air monitoring stations in a given urban area produce very scary readings. The equivalent of, say, a million fibres may be found in a cubic meter of air far from a construction site. Closer to such a site, the asbestos count may be ten times as great.

"New York City is literally sitting in a cloud of asbestos," testified Dr. William Nicholson, physicist for Mount Sinai Hospital's Environmental Science Laboratory. And another authority, Dr. Robert N. Rickles has said flat out that it might be the smart thing to eliminate asbestos and find something safer for fireproofing. Even union officials, never ones to yield their men's jobs easily, have had it with asbestos. Jacob Novak, whose New York local insulates pipes after asbestos has been sprayed, said recently at a hearing, "I am not here to destroy a trade, but after burying more and more of my men I know what the hazards are. Whatever the cost of replacing sprayed asbestos, no one can argue it isn't worth it."

And so the trade-offs go. More and more, it will be the net environmental gain that determines the right technological choice. On such a basis, who could argue against banishing asbestos?