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ASBESTOS
by
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Even experts are uncertain as to the extent to which the "as-pest". the "mineral of a thousand possibilities" is put to use. Some estimate its use in 3000 different products, some quote numbers even larger than that. There is one thing which is certain, which is: that year after year approximately 200 000 tons of this grey rock is imported by this country and that, 50 000 people are engaged in its manufacturing process. Added to this, is the far greater number of products imported that contain asbestos.

Spokesmen for the industries insist that, without asbestos our present lifestyles could not be maintained. Are we, therefore, to acquiesce to painful, chronic illnesses and the death of thousands of people? It is entirely possible that, in the case of some products, the use of this mineral is unavoidable. But, there have been some doubts expressed. In The Netherlands and in Sweden, to mention only two countries, the use of asbestos has been largely limited. There have been no reports to-date that, this policy has had a negative effect on industrial growth.

Yet, we continue to use the same material. Textiles from the dangerous blue asbestos (krokydolith) are still being used to insulate turbines and other machinery, although equivalent substitutes have been available for some time.

In certain areas -- such as in shipbuilding in the Federal Republic --

the use of asbestos was abandoned for some time. The manufacturing company Siemens, prohibited the "unloading, loading and handling of asbestos mats or, the use of asbestos sprays for insulating purposes" by its personnel. Also, all employees, who came and continue to be in contact with asbestos are medically examined under the provisions of the work-health act. However, if asbestos is to be banned entirely as a product in the manufacture of turbines "a legal basis will be necessary", says Mr. Seybold of Siemens assemblies.

Kurt Ledwan, a member of the board of directors of the insulation manufacturing plant in Mülheim, has already worked for many years toward achieving this goal. There, the problem has been resolved. During a meeting at the plant it was agreed that, workers cannot be assigned jobs which would bring them in contact with asbestos material. Here, other insulating materials have been used for some time.

However, that is not to say, that the problem of illnesses contracted because of asbestos is, thereby, resolved. Illnesses caused by the fine asbestos dust often become apparent only after 15 to 40 years.

Kurt Ledwan recounted the fate of one of his colleagues: 'Klaus H. began his apprenticeship as insulator in 1952. He was then given the job making insulating mattresses from pure blue asbestos textiles. They are sewn together with a quilt-pattern stitch using white asbestos threads.

His father was then 7 years with the company. In 1956, Klaus H. began work on the assembly line. In 1960, his father died. Cause of death, after many months of agonized suffering: cancer.

Six Years of Legal Battle

In 1977, Klaus H. entered his period of suffering. The examining physician reported work-connected illness. The diagnosis was accepted as

being only beginning stages of asbestosis. The agency of the German Workers Union for social-legal aid, brought a complaint on behalf of Klaus H.. Court appearances, verdicts followed and continued for several years. At long last, in September 1977, the decrease in income of 40% incurred meanwhile by the plaintiff, was acknowledged.

One year later, Klaus H. is incapable of holding down his job at the assembly line. He is admitted to the hospital several times. However, he continues to work in between the hospital stays inspite excruciating pains which become more and more unbearable and, cannot be alleviated by the medicine he takes even though, the dosage has been increased in strength.

Christmas 1979, Klaus H. takes a brief vacation from work. Beginning of January, while on vacation, He is admitted to the hospital. On 11 January, Klaus H. dies in agonizing pains. Diagnosis: cancer. Klaus H. was the 14th case of death in the history of the company, related to contact with asbestos. In April of this year, the 15th death followed.

Kurt Ledwan asks, who will be next? Will it be the woman colleague W., 39 years of age, mother of two children and a 40% decrease in income? Will it be the colleague K., 44 years of age, father of two children and a 100% decrease in income? His father was also a victim of his trade. He died of bronchial cancer. Will it be the woman colleague R., 39 years of age, mother of four children whose decrease in income changed within one year from 20 to 70%? Or will it be myself; at present with a decrease of only 40%. The number of people in the company on sick leave, continues to increase. Presently, over 50 compensation requests have been submitted, 42 have been granted retirement pension. And he continues in a laconic sort of way: According to the statistics of Prof. Ulmer, there are only 7 to 8 years of life left counting from the time when work-connected illness

is first reported. According to this, I still have 18 whole months before me.

But Kurt Ledwan continues with his fight. He requests that, the Federal Republic prohibit all use of asbestos except where "legitimate need" necessitates its use. In the meantime, Kurt Ledwan, acquired many fellow-supporters.

Will the Federal Republic listen to them?

Photographs:

p.5 Asbestos is used in various ways in the insulation of many machines.

The most dangerous way to apply asbestos: asbestos spraying.

p.6 (upper left): separate, miniscule asbestos particles enter into the lungs.
(upper right):the results: prolonged, agonized suffering.