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Manville Breathes Easier: Asbestos Dust Fear Eased

By LOIS MAPLES
Special to The New York Times

MANVILLE — Residents of this Central Jersey industrial town of 13,000 are breathing easier these days: the air along Main Street is more contaminated by car fumes than by asbestos dust.

Asbestos dust became a prime health threat several years ago when local doctors linked it with lung cancer and the rare mesothelioma (cancer of the chest or intestinal cavities).

Yet asbestos remains a way of life to most residents. It is a livelihood to 1,800 workers in the Johns-Manville plant around which the town is built. It is here that the company makes asbestos shingles, pipe and other asbestos products.

But asbestos is also a threat.

Statistics revealed recently in Department of Labor hearings in Washington raised the quiet threat to serious alarm. Joseph Patero, Mayor of Manville, felt called upon to answer the alarm. Mr. Patero is a foreman in the J-M plant, as well as part-time Mayor.

"Can we die by just breathing the air in our town?" his constituents asked him.

Police Monitor Air

The Mayor determined to set up a system of air-monitoring units throughout town, preferably with the aid of the state, in order to ascertain the amount of asbestos dust in the air.

A quick trip to Trenton found state authorities unwilling to cooperate as an impartial third party, on the basis that no minimum standards for asbestos particles in environmental air have ever been determined.

Mayor Patero appealed to J-M, which lent him two large monitoring units and several small personnel units to be worn by policemen as they walked their beats and directed traffic on Main Street.

When filters from the units were analyzed by a borough health officer, carbon monoxide fumes from Main Street traffic and the town's Rustic Mall Shopping Center were so dense it was impossible to find the asbestos particles.

T. J. Klein Associates

Michael Kassick, a patrolman in Manville, with the device used to monitor the pollution in the air.

Subsequent monitoring of the air continued to show that exhaust from cars posed more of a health threat to Main Street shoppers than stray particles of asbestos.

Dr. Maxwell Borow of nearby Bound Brook, a leader in the research of asbestos-related cancers, agrees that it is no more dangerous to shop on Manville's Main Street than on the streets of any other traffic-choked town.

He has discovered only three cases of asbestos-related cancer among people who were never plant workers. One was a woman who inhaled asbestos dust as she shook it from her husband's work clothes before laundering. Another was a woman who played as a child on the J-M dump where asbestos refuse was discarded. Dr. Borow has been unable to trace the third case history.

Waste Is Covered

Now asbestos waste is being covered immediately with earth to prevent the wind from whipping fibers through the air. The level of asbestos dust within the plant is another story, however. Both union officials and Dr. Borow are fighting to lower the allowable level of asbestos fiber in the plant from five fibers per cubic centimeter of air to two fibers and eventually to zero fibers. Also working to this end is Dr. Irving Selikoff, director of the Environmental Science Laboratory at Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York City.

Proposed new standards set by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration of the United States Department of Labor would lower the level of asbestos dust to two fibers effective June 7.

J-M officials have protested that such a level is both technically and economically nonfeasible, and that to force them into such a standard, along with proposed new warning labels on solid asbestos products, would serve only to force the company out of the asbestos business.

J. M. Ruff, the local plant manager, estimates that this would mean the loss of about 800 jobs and a $10-million payroll to Manville.

Old-timers admit there is no doubt but that in-plant dust standards have vastly improved through the years. Some can remember the asbestos clouds so heavy as to make visibility across the room impossible. Those days are gone, thanks to constant pressure from workmen and cooperation of the company.

However, the effects of those days are only just now being harvested, since the incubation period for the cancers appears to be about 20 to 30 years. Dr. Borow presented statistics showing that 50 per cent of all asbestos workers would die of cancer of some form.

"Two out of 10 will die of lung cancer; one out of 10 will die of mesothelioma; one out of 10 will die of gastrointestinal cancer; and one out of 10 will die from some other form of cancer," he said.

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