

CRISIS RESPONSE

but when the president of the world's largest asbestos company called a meeting of his peers, they came. Solon asked me to write a slide presentation, which he would give after Burnett welcomed our guests. He asked me to pull no punches in the presentation and to lay out in no uncertain terms the seriousness of the problems facing the industry. I sat in on the meeting and was surprised to discover that many of the participants considered many of Dr. Selikoff's charges so outrageous that they had discounted them entirely. Many seemed unaware of the research coming out of the U.K. and South Africa that indicated the health threat was far wider in scope than they had been lead to believe.

Agreement was reached, after much discussion, to form a trade association that came to be called the Asbestos Information Association/North America (AIA/NA), with J-M providing both staff and funding for the first year of operation. If, at the end of that time, the member companies found the Association was providing a useful service, a mechanism would be developed for sharing the costs on an equitable basis. Raines became executive director with me as chief of staff. Clearly, at least to me, the deciding factor in inducing those in the room to join up was our warning that the two new regulatory agencies created by Congress that year — OSHA and EPA — were both eyeing asbestos as their first problem to tackle.

The responsibilities of the AIA/NA would go far beyond normal public relations, at least as it was commonly practiced in 1971. The operative word in the name of the Association was "information." The Association would not just deal with the media, but would create a technical information arm to advise industry members on the appropriate ways to control asbestos exposures in the workplace; a regulatory information arm to work with government agencies on the development of reasonable workplace and environmental standards; and, in the future, a legal arm to assist the industry as a whole in defending itself against liability claims. The latter would, in time, swallow the entire trade association, but in 1971, the liability issue did not even show up on the screen and would not do so for years to come.

Risk Comes Home

We had all been dreading the inevitable discovery of the first "neighborhood" or "household" case of mesothelioma in the United States. When it did happen, the shock was incredible because it had truly occurred in our own household. The victim was the wife of Cliff Sheckler, who was one of J-M's two top industrial hygiene officers and a member of the Environmental Control Committee of the AIA/NA. Since the Shecklers had never lived close to any Manville plant during his long career with the company, it was a true household case: she had developed the disease from inhaling the asbestos dust he brought home on his clothes from work. More than any other development, the death of Sheckler's wife forced

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