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# Hazards of asbestos dust

Asbestos dust may be more insidiously lethal than many authorities believe. The current issue of the medical journal "The Lancet" reports the death of a man of 48 from the coincident development of asbestosis and an associated form of cancer. His only exposure to asbestos dust had occurred thirty years ago when he worked for six months as a grinder in an asbestos factory. The case raises several issues, all of social importance.

First, under the existing structure of the Prescribed Diseases Regulations, no claim for disability can be made for the malignancy associated with asbestosis or the asbestosis itself unless exposure to asbestos can be established as having occurred after July 4, 1948, which is a purely administrative date relating to the introduction of the regulations. It is quite clear that the Ministry of Social Security should review these regulations in their application to all diseases which have a long induction period, such as bone necrosis following work in compressed air, and various forms of tumour whose association with working environments is only now becoming clear.

Second, attention should be given to those points in the carriage of bulk asbestos which fall outside the 1931 Asbestos Industry Regulations. These regulations are at present being amended because it is now realised that they are inadequate in the light of present knowl-

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edge, yet they are still taken as providing safe exposure limits in such places as docks and transient storage warehouses. Fears expressed by dockers handling asbestos have been allayed by an assurance that malignancy cannot result unless exposure has been heavy enough to cause asbestosis. This is a dangerous assumption, no longer supported by informed medical opinion.

It is all too obvious that the uncontrolled tipping of asbestos waste, like that which took place in Buxworth, in Derbyshire, presents a serious hazard which needs to be suppressed by all possible means including proper legislation. There is no longer any question of "safe" exposure to asbestos, but there is an urgent need of new rigorously controlled methods of handling and packaging. Further, there are experiments under way which propose asphalt-asbestos mixtures for road surfaces. If these prove successful many thousands of tons of asbestos might be used on the roads each year. With wear, would such a surface produce dust, and would asbestos particles begin to reach the atmosphere along all the roads where it was used? Unless these questions can be answered with a stringently proven negative, any authority which uses such surfaces experimentally might be guilty of an action which both morally, and in its results, is as serious as the indiscriminate exposure of a population to high levels of ionising radiation.