

The Familiar Aroma of Panic

Sensationalism in the general press can have two effects: (1) stir industry and governmental groups to corrective action and (2) cause overreaction and panic in the public's mind. We saw it in the press treatment of the "plastic pollution" problem; we're seeing it now in the asbestos situation.

Fact: Overwhelming statistical data indicate that inhalation of excessive amounts of free fibers or dust of crocidolite and amosite asbestos can cause disabling lung damage and possibly death. Result: OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) has designated asbestos as a "target health hazard"; EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) has designated it a "hazardous air pollutant." And OSHA standards for exposure to permissible concentrations of asbestos dust (5 fibers/cu cm for an 8-hr time-weighted average) have been established; they will be further tightened in July '76 (to 2 fibers/cu cm).

The general press has had a field day. Talk about irresponsible reporting! After reading one of the articles I even got to wondering about the asbestos in the taping compound in my dry-wall-construction home. Also, in the general press, the "hazards" faced by mechanics blowing out asbestos-containing brake-lining dust from old brake assemblies are highlighted regardless of published studies by the U.S. Public Health Service showing that less than 1% of the 50% of asbestos in brake linings remains a free fiber in the dust after wear, or another study that established that men working in the blow-out procedure had a time-weighted-exposure of 0.63 fibers/cu cm (compared with the five-fiber OSHA standard).

The fact that the direst predictions of fatalities are based on data from fatalities and illnesses caused by working conditions 20 and 40 years ago, and in industries where free asbestos was blown, does not hinder the imagination of the reporters. (Remember those newspaper stories about that hazardous new plastic—PVC—that was saturating the environment with phosgene and hy-

drochloric acid?) Unfortunately, the aroma of panic is familiar.

So, what's the answer?

In plastics, of course, asbestos is of primary concern to those using reinforced phenolic molding compounds, vinyl tiles, some reinforced polyesters, and other materials. And the question for these people is, how much of a problem (or hazard) does use of asbestos entail? Frankly, as yet, no one knows. To my knowledge, no data exist on concentration of loose fibers in the atmosphere when one is running asbestos-filled phenolics; we must find out. Also, apparently no data now exist on potential dangers of chrysotile asbestos (the most commonly used as a reinforcement). OSHA recognizes this in their standard when they state: "Reasons of practical administration preclude a variety of standards for different kinds of asbestos and of workplaces. Also, while the evidence tends to show that crocidolite, for instance, is more harmful than chrysotile, the evidence is not sufficient to establish separate standards for varieties of asbestos." Also, they recognize the differences in medical opinions when they state: "Most medical opinion is divided between a two-fiber standard and a five-fiber standard." (Both quotes from *Federal Register*, Vol. 37, No. 110—Wed., June 7, 1972.)

The nut of it is that there is still a great deal yet to be found out. Hysterical publicity never solved a problem. The answer lies in cold objectivity in gathering and analyzing sufficient data to control the problem. There is no question that asbestos can constitute a health hazard (so can handling sulfuric acid). Don't let's throw the baby out with the bath water.

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