

Death of the Asbestos Industry

the entire industry to face up to the realities of the asbestos threat, something it had seemed reluctant to do previously. Ed Fenner, the other top J-M industrial hygiene officer and, like Sheckler, a member of the Association's environmental committee, would himself die from mesothelioma in 1984. Both men had spent their early years at J-M as plant engineers, at a time when dust controls in industry plants and mills were rudimentary, if they existed at all.

As a matter of principle and good public relations, the Association steadfastly maintained that asbestos should not be used for "inappropriate purposes" and that any use of asbestos in its "free" form should be controlled to reduce employee and general public exposure to the extent technically feasible.

For decades, the steel girders of high-rise buildings in most American cities were fireproofed by a process called "asbestos spraying." Raw asbestos fiber was mixed with water in a tank and shot out of a nozzle at the girders from as far as 20 feet away. Despite the presence of water in the concoction, the process was notoriously dusty. In order to contain the dust within the construction site, tarpaulins were generally hung from the outside of the floor being sprayed. At this time in New York City, a number of high-rise buildings, including the World Trade Center, were under construction. On windy days, the tarpaulins would frequently buckle, particularly on the higher floors, allowing a shower of dried asbestos spray to cascade down on the heads of pedestrians below. Dr. Sellkoff's people at Mount Sinai claimed that asbestos spraying was the cause of the "asbestos bodies" being routinely found at autopsy in the lungs of New Yorkers not occupationally exposed to asbestos and predicted an epidemic of asbestos-related disease in the general public.

The head of the local asbestos sprayers trade group came to us for assistance. We studied his data and the precautions being taken to control the dust, and put it on the agenda for the next full meeting of the Association. It was not an economic consideration for mining members of the AIA since the volume of asbestos used for spray applications was infinitesimal. The discussion therefore centered solely on whether it was a controllable use of asbestos, and, if it wasn't, what should we do about it. During a break in the meeting, I strolled over to a nearby window and looked out. The meeting was being held in the Engineers Club, which was on 40th Street in New York City overlooking Bryant Park. Across the park, on 42nd Street, the W.R. Grace building was under construction. From a tarpaulined floor about 10 stories up, a virtual snow shower of sprayed asbestos was slowly drifting down to the street below. It was a visual demonstration of the public relations nightmare that we would be facing if we lent our support to the asbestos

Three Asbestos Curiosities