

FOR ASBESTOS INFORMATION ASSOCIATES

PROGRAM 'ASBESTOS-THE DEADLY MINERAL' STATION WBAI/FM

DATE October 4, 1972 8:15 PM CITY New York

FULL TEXT

MODERATOR: Tonight's Public Affairs Magazine is about asbestos and following the taped part of the program we will take phone calls after that and we'd like to hear from people during the phone call portion who have had personal experiences with health hazards on their jobs. Health hazards in general. Following is a tape which is coming right up. We'll be taking phone calls on the subject of health hazards. Job situation. How the deadly mineral.

MAN: We're not talking about rare cases. We're talking about an epidemic of cancer in the asbestos industry. We suspect over the next twenty years, ten years, it's going to be tremendous numbers, probably runs into the tens of thousands of people. Many of us have been exposed to it. What's to say that all of us who have been exposed to the spray at the World Trade Center, what percentage of those who will come down with cancer twenty years from now, it may be a large number of people.

MAN: Asbestos is all around you. It coats the steel beams of many skyscrapers. It goes into the brakes of most cars and trucks and into floor tiles, pipe insulation and roofing shingles. Asbestos is widely used because it is fireproof, a good insulator and the only common mineral that can be woven into cloth.

WOMAN: Since the beginning of the century, doctors have known that huge quantities of asbestos dust ingested into the lungs causes gradual strangulation. That disease is asbestosis. It is like black lung, the coal disease that shortens the lives of miners.

MAN: Now the link between asbestos and cancer has been proven. Asbestos diseases will take the lives of ninety thousand of the two hundred and fifty thousand Americans who work directly with asbestos. And they are threatening the health of at least three and a half million other construction workers. Asbestos may be increasing the incidence of lung cancer among the general population.

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MAN: It's the opinion of a lot of guys that even though with the ...

WOMAN: ... Business Agent, New York Asbestos Workers Union.

MAN: ... many, many fellows have attracted a disease and the end result was they've gone to the hospital, had operations, and the fellows believed their doctors ... some one mentioned, hasn't had a winner yet, you know.

MAN: ... where I work, has available the entire records of the international ...

MAN: ... Bill Nicholson, doctor of the Mount Sinai Labs.

NICHOLSON: ... the New York and New Jersey locals are -- he's traced every member of that union since it began in 1912. Taking the 1943 membership, there were six hundred and thirty-two members in 1943. As of January first of this year, four hundred and eighty-four of those members have died. Whereas only about three hundred would have been expected to have died. That is a hundred and eighty-four died who should not have.

When one looks at the causes of their deaths, one finds that instead of about eleven deaths due to lung cancer, there were seventy-three. Seven times more than expected.

MAN: We've had a couple, though, we've had a couple -- Jack Novak, the former business manager of the local had an operation in January, part of his lung was taken out and he's on the road to -- he's almost fully recovered now, but unfortunately, I must say quite honestly, that the odds are very much against us.

MAN: ... that I, myself, January, had ...

WOMAN: Jack Novak.

NOVAK: ... lung operation containing a tumor and also an asbestosis of the lung. however, I am a very fortunate man to be here giving you this information: mine was proven to be nonmalignant. However I am the rare and exceptional case. However, at this time, as you notice in my voice, it is very sad, because of the fact in the past twelve hours, I have just received a bulletin, a notice, that my own international president Albert E. Hutchinson has passed away of the same dreadful disease. asbestosis of the lungs.

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MAN: There are other fellows that have this disease that they're not aware of, you know, and we try to help the guys along and make them feel like everything's going to be allright, but we know what the end result is going to be.

NICHOLSON: We find that nearly fifty percent of them, of the deaths, could be due to some form of cancer so that you are dealing with a material that in excessive concentration is a very potent carcinogen. Also, when you look throughout the United States, there might be two hundred to two hundred and fifty thousand workers occupationally exposed to dust at this time. And if their mortality experience is similar to that of the insulation workers, it's really a national catastrophe.

MAN: All I can say, is, nearly all the material we use is bad for our health because you're handling all of it. Nearly every heavy piece of material outside the canvas is about the only thing (UNCLEAR) ... eventually, one of these days, it's going to kill us all. That's all I have to say. I know it's going to happen because already I have emphysema, see. My lungs are in pretty bad shape. Developed maybe about fifteen years ago.

MAN: Asbestos dust causes at least three diseases. Asbestosis, lung cancer, and mesothelioma. Mesothelioma almost never occurs without some known exposure to asbestos.

MAN: Asbestos fibers can break down into extremely fine minute fibrilles: in fact, it can be as small as about one-fifty thousands of an inch in size - that's not an uncommon size at all. These are inhaled into the lower respiratory tract and stick there. The presence of asbestos in your lungs causes fibrous scar tissue to form, which prevents the passage of the oxygen from your lungs into the bloodstream. And workers, in addition to the cancer, die of what is called asbestosis - that is, they virtually suffocate because they can't get enough oxygen into their system.

MAN: Felt pretty good until this last January.

WOMAN: Daniel Makaborsky, asbestos factory worker.

MAN: ...pretty healthy. Just hit me all of a sudden, started getting that bloated stomach. Went to my own doctor, and he put me in a hospital as soon as he looked at me. Put me in a hospital, and well after eight days they couldn't find nothing wrong, then they did an exploratory and found out what happened.

MAN: In 1963 you came in with a bloated abdominal cavity, and were operated on to find out why...

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MAN: Dr. Barrow.

BARROW: ...cure your type of tumor, which we did not recognize. And microscopically it just told us this was mesothelioma, about which I knew nothing. I had heard of it, and in looking it up in textbooks, there was very little described on mesothelioma. As a matter of fact they state that it's a pathologic curiosity and almost never exists.

And then the cases started coming one after another, and now we have about sixty-seven, sixty-eight cases. All these patients had asbestos in their lungs, and all of them, with the exception of three, were employees in the asbestos industry. And these people, first of all, had asbestos in their lungs, causing pulmonary asbestosis. And then twenty or more years later, after their first exposure to it - they had twenty years of continuous exposure, where you just need exposure for a month or two - and twenty years, or thirty, or even forty years later they come down with malignancies. The mesothelioma remains confined to the organ or to the cavity in which it starts. And basically it gets larger, and larger, and larger until eventually it compresses the organ.

MAKABORSKY: ...Dr. Barrow and the other doctors trying to help me out with a new drug, that's the only chance I have. That's progressing on a long road, but I don't know...

BARROW: ...eighteen months. The average life expectancy at the time of diagnosis is probably about twelve, fourteen months. None have gone longer than eighteen months.

MAKABORSKY: ...that's where all the dust comes from.

WMAN: Daniel Makaborsky died on September 14th. He was forty-nine years old, and a member of the Johns-Manville Company's Quarter Century Club.

Very little was done to limit the levels of exposure to asbestos dust in the work place until the 1960s. For years the Labor Department had maintained a limit for asbestos particles in the air of twelve fibers per cubic centimeter. A centimeter is about a thimble-full of air.

MAN: Then the rising incidence of disease, the passage of the Occupational Health and Safety Act in 1971, and growing pressure from unions forced the Department of Labor to reexamine its standards.

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Industry proposed a limit of ten fibers; it later came down to five. Earlier this year the Labor Department finally set a standard of five fibers until 1976, and two fibers thereafter.

Dr. Zelikoff, and other independent researchers, denounced the four year delay before the two fiber level as inexcusable. While the difference between two and five fibers may not seem great, it will mean that asbestos workers will breathe an extra twenty to thirty million fibers per day for four more years.

WOMAN: In addition to the delay, the new standard only counts fibers longer than five microns in length. Many fibers are shorter than this. There is growing evidence from Dr. Zelikoff's research that these smaller particles do even greater damage than the longer ones.

MAN: Paul Sadura, staff writer for the New Yorker.

SADURA: All the standards that have been proposed...here and elsewhere in the world, are geared only to the possible prevention of asbestosis scarring of the lungs. There has been no threshold of value, no standard set anywhere that would purport in any way to prevent the occurrence of lung cancer.

TONY MASACCI: ...call zero exposure to asbestos fibers...

WOMAN: Tony Masacci, legislative citizenship director of the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers Union.

MASACCI: We don't know what level at which cancer occurs or doesn't occur. There's no safe level, as far as we're concerned. The five fiber, and then the two fiber, really deals with preventing asbestosis, but not preventing the incidence of cancer.

So therefore we call for a standard that would protect workers against cancer.

MAN: I was kind of disappointed that they didn't bring it down, the fiber count lower, you know, they had it up to five. But I guess that's what most industry wanted, to keep it at five, because - well, I guess they're looking out for their pocketbooks more than...probably too expensive for most of them. But J-M wouldn't have a problem getting it down, because most of their operations are under five now. So J-M's one of the more advanced, I guess, in dust collecting and all that, environmental, and so on. I guess they seen the handwriting on the wall, and they been trying to clean it up.

MAN: Daniel Makeborsky was a worker in a factory that produces asbestos products. The other major use of asbestos in the U.S. is in the construction trades.

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MAN: See here, this is a pile of rubble, right, that the laborer has swept up into one little area. We have concrete dust there, we have broken light bulbs, we have cans, we have fiberclases, and we have the natural dirt of the atmosphere, right? This is all pushed together. Now when he's picking this here stuff up, this will create so much dust it's unbelievable. As Mike just showed you before when he just slapped the open ends of a section in front of the light bulb, you saw the dust there. Well, that's minute compared to what will be created here.

Now the fellow that's working with it may not necessarily use a mask. Now Charlie may be working there, and the laborer comes along and picks this up. Now Charlie doesn't need the respirator now. Now this guy's creating huge amounts of dust. So now not only is Charlie, and Mike, and Peter working here, there may be other trades in the immediate area, such as electricians, or carpenters or so on, you know - you can name a half dozen other trades. So the other fellows become recipients of something created by somebody else, and they're not aware of this.

MAN: ...haven't seen a mask yet that I think is that good. Gets saturated, and pretty soon you got the dust trapped inside the mask, you're breathing it all.

MAN: Another thing, like Nick wears glasses. A fellow such as Nick wearing glasses, if he uses a respirator, regardless of what type it is, after an hour, half an hour, and possibly several minutes, his glasses will start to cloud up, because of the exhaling, right? Now when you exhale and go up through the mask, no matter how tight it is, and it will cloud one's glasses.

Now can you imagine a man, sometimes works several hundred feet in the air on scaffolds, so now if a fellow's got clouded glasses, if he needs the glasses for vision and his glasses are momentarily clouded, he could be walking off into the atmosphere and go down maybe twenty stories or forty stories.

MAN: I can't, I work with it fifteen minutes, and I'm choking. But as you say, use the respirator. How long can you use the respirator? If you use it ten or fifteen minutes, that's going to kill you too, because you're not breathing properly.

MAN: He has a hard time breathing without a respirator. Then if he puts one on, it's twice as hard. And all his organs are working overtime.

MAN: Can you tell me if they're made a hundred percent secure, respirators?

MAN: I doubt it.

MAN: Yeah, we never found one.

MAN: Everything that has an advantage has a disadvantage going with it. If a fellow wears a respirator eight hours a day, at the end of the day he'd wind up with a heart attack. And he can't produce as much. Now if the guy doesn't use the respirator, he'll produce three times as much, but what is it doing to his body.

MAN: As you said, some fellows can't breathe properly. But you get anybody that's put an average of ten, fifteen years in this business, he's not going to be proper any more, because he's already infected.

MAN: ...his lungs have started it.

WOMAN: The asbestos manufacturing industry has been widely criticized for the long years in which it did little for the health of its workers. The industry did not begin major dust control programs until after Dr. Zelikoff's findings became known. It refused to assist Zelikoff's early studies of the asbestos epidemic.

Johns-Manville, the industry giant, turned down Dr. Barrow's request to fund an exhibit on the numerous health hazards in the late 1960s. For years J-M and other companies refused to tell employees when their x-rays began to reveal signs of asbestosis.

During the years when reports of asbestos-linked cancer first began to appear, J-M refused to release these x-rays to private physicians. And J-M is generally thought to be the most progressive member of the industry in matters of occupational health.

MAN: In making this documentary, we tried hard to get the industry point of view. We visited the Johns-Manville plant in Manville, New Jersey. There, public relations director William Ruff, refused to be interviewed. Referring our questions to the corporate headquarters in Colorado, he explained that J-M and the industry had had bad experiences with the press in recent years.

Mr. Goodman, national director of public relations for J-M, was not available when we called him in Colorado, or when we called him repeatedly during a trip of his to New York. And he never personally returned our calls.

Finally we asked Mr. Matthew Switonik, executive secretary of the Asbestos Information Association, an industry-wide public relations group, for an interview. He accepted, but hours before his scheduled appearance, we received the following telegram.

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In light of past experiences, the Asbestos Information Association of North America must decline the invitation to appear on the WBAL-FM radio program on asbestos. Very truly yours, Matthew M. Switonik, executive secretary.

MASACCI: Frankly, if they were truly an Asbestos Information Association, rather than an asbestos misinformation association, they would be very greatly for an opportunity to hear...

WOMAN: Tony Masacci.

MASACCI: ...what myself and others would have to say. It's rather apparent that they would rather just sit back and issue statements or denials, rather than get into any sort of debate over what the objective facts are. What management has been doing is attempting at every turn of the road to frustrate any effort to improve the situations of workers, and the community - because I have to make this quite clear: it's not only workers who are being subjected to the perils of cancer, but the community also.

MAN: How long - I can't guess how long - but there is sufficient evidence over many years now that there was a relationship between asbestos and cancer. I mean, it's not something we discovered overnight. And the industry certainly had information that we didn't have, you know. Their own doctors were able to see what was happening to individuals over any number of years. Certainly out at Johns-Manville in New Jersey they were aware that people were coming down with cancer in disproportionate numbers.

MAKABORSKY: I guess that was their policy, it was a company policy, just didn't let anybody know. Somebody knew, you know, he was coming down with a lot of dust, or something, he would have maybe switched jobs, or something like that, you know. That's one thing that the company didn't do right.

MAN: As far as we're concerned, what industry has accepted from workers is a subsidy, a subsidy in years of people's lives, and you can translate it into a monetary subsidy. And what in essence industry is saying, we wish to continue with that subsidy and not have to invest more money to make plant and equipment safe.

MAN: Dr. Irving Zelikoff, director of the Mt. Sinai Environmental Laboratory.

ZELIKOFF: The safe working environment is expensive...money necessary to make an environment safe, it would bear heavily on their competitive position. So that if other companies do not

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do this, the company that wishes to do it might find it very difficult. And this is in large part what is happening, and I think has greatly delayed the necessary safety measures.

MAN: ...and would not break them. I mean, this is the old and usual story that comes from industry: it's going to be too expensive. We don't even think that should be a factor in this whole question, simply because when you're confronted with the fact that exposure is going to cause cancer, there should be no question that you have to arrest that situation immediately. It's unconscionable to continue an operation knowing that a percentage of the people will contract cancer.

They've usually done nothing, they've only responded to pressure to do -- you know, even to make some superficial improvements, such as what has occurred in the City of New York, supposedly protecting some of the populous from asbestos spraying. But, you know, there'll be a ban on asbestos spraying, fine. But you know, millions and millions of people have been exposed, and tens of thousand of workers have been exposed, and continue to be exposed. Nothing has changed.

MAN: I would like someone to say that I'm wrong when I say this, that you can't eat properly, you can't breathe properly, and if you do smoke, the cigarettes don't taste the same.

MAN: They go in and spray it when nobody else is supposed to be on the floor. But as soon as they leave and they go to the next floor - and they might block it off. But then the steam fitter comes along and he's got to put a hanger on the beam, he's got to scrape that stuff off. Or you go up there, and you're working, and you brush against it, and it comes down on you, it gets down in your clothes, then you're breathing it at the same time. So I just don't think it's any good at all.

MAN: For years I see these fellows spraying these beams. Now this is going on about ten or fifteen years. I seen inspectors come down on the job, they're going to outlaw them. They're still going on, they're still going on. So sometimes I think these interviews, as far as I'm concerned, ain't doing a world of good, because nobody seems to do nothing about it.

MAN: The other day in Cincinatti it was discovered in a major research center...

WOMAN: Paul Badura.

BADURA: ...spraying asbestos. And the Assistant Cincinatti Health Commissioner said that he had not seen fit to issue any

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asbestos regulations in Cincinnati, because he felt that the evidence incriminating asbestos was not sufficient.

Well, we only had two major occupational health laws in this country, the Walsh-Healy Act, which I believe was passed in 1936, and with a few amendments remained unchanged until December of 1970, and the Occupational Safety and Health Act. The Occupational Safety and Health Act, for which the unions had lobbied for many years, and has the possibility of turning the situation around - but when you have a group understaffed as much as OSHA is to inspect that many work places, one realizes that the problem is almost insurmountable.

At this point there's only one enforcement agency in the federal government, and that is the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, which is part of the Department of Labor. They have some forty industrial hygienists, approximately that number, to inspect some four million work places.

MAN: OSHA does not have the inspectors to put around, not only in the metropolitan area, but nationwide. The inspectors that they do have, I doubt if I would be able to see inspections on five percent of my work in New York City.

BADURA: The other problem is that the government has continually tried to attack the asbestos problem on the basis of coming up with a number standard for exposure. Well the thing is, you see, about all these standards, whether it's twelve, five, three, six, it doesn't really matter. It's nifty arithmetic, the real problem is to force management, the asbestos industry, to install equipment with quality controls, so that you know that this equipment, ventilation equipment, dust control equipment, will keep the level of asbestos exposure down automatically.

It seems to me that a technological society should find something that is essential - but it's also risky. You simply spend the time and money to make sure that it's used in a way that -- there's no reason, for example, in modern society why a stipend for a worker's time and his pay should be his early death.

WOMAN: Exposure to asbestos is not confined to the work place. Asbestos dust filters into city air as buildings are fireproofed and car brakes wear down. Although many asbestos products are safe, like tiles and ironing board covers, and other products in which the asbestos is firmly bound, any

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product which produces dust adds billions of fibers to the surrounding air.

Asbestos insulation is still spread on cinders in all but a handful of cities. Wallboard and joints give off fibers when they are cut or sanded.

MAN: Little is known about the environmental dangers of asbestos, except in the vicinity of asbestos mines in South Africa. No medical studies have yet found higher incidence of asbestos diseases outside the work place. There is, however, growing concern that asbestos in our air is contributing to the higher incidence of lung cancer already found among urban dwellers.

MAN: It's not just a matter of the unions being concerned properly with the health of the workers, but really it affects the entire city. The best illustration of that is what happened with the...

MAN: Frank Schonfield, Painters Union, New York.

SCHONFIELD: ...asbestos which is sprayed on the steel for insulation purposes causes cancer. Now they've discontinued it. However, in these new buildings they have a dropped ceiling, and there's a space between the dropped ceiling and the concrete and the steel, and this space is used as a return for the air in the air-conditioning system. Now over a period of time, as this asbestos, you know, drops off as fine dust, this is sucked into the air-conditioning system and the people working in that office, or visiting in that office are subject to breathing in this asbestos.

MAN: ...laboratories, ten specimens of lungs of the general population were taken in, everybody that came to autopsy in a consecutive series, so that there was no bias as to how the individual was chosen. And every individual had some asbestos fibers in his lungs. And that's to be expected, because subsequently we've gone out and measured the quantity of asbestos in the air: in fact, we had a study funded by the National Air Pollution Control Administration to evaluate the asbestos levels across the United States, and we found asbestos in every major metropolitan area, in a wide variety of concentrations. In some of those circumstances you could actually see that there were excessive exposures due to the presence of industry, or some other source in that city.

You may recall when you see a high rise office building constructed, that they would fireproof that building with a spray material, which in New York City had contained asbestos. That

process where they put this material on the steel work was a very inefficient one, as much of the asbestos was sprayed out into the environment. You saw snowfalls on Madison Avenue, or Park Avenue, or wherever you walked near a high rise construction. That procedure, as of February 20th of this year, has been banned, you can't spray asbestos in New York City, nor in Boston, Philadelphia, the State of Illinois. But you still can in other cities in the United States, and it still is a problem elsewhere.

As a result of that procedure, we had made some measurements of the asbestos levels in the city around high rise construction sites, and found it in excess of a hundred times of that measured away from those sites.

MAN: No one knows, for example, how many fibers you have to breathe in to trigger off the mechanism that would cause a cell to go wild and a mesothelioma. Mesothelioma has been known to occur in women whose only exposure to asbestos was that they washed their work clothes in which their husbands came home. Cases of children with asbestos poisoning who died of mesothelioma. Cases of people whose only known exposure to asbestos was that they lived in close proximity to shipyards where asbestos materials were being used to make twine.

No one's going to know what the effect of all this spraying in urban areas, spraying of asbestos on insulating materials in skyscrapers, will be until about the year 2000.

MAKABORSKY: ...(INAUDIBLE-COVERED BY SOUNDS)...

MAN: ...not a question of leaving the trade, you can't leave the trade. I mean, work has got to be produced, work has got to be done. What you have to do is to make the work safe.

MAN: The money, that's why they do it, the money, the money.

MAN: Well, yes, the workers are being conditioned to be very cynical and skeptical.

MAN: Production, production, production.

MAN: ...over the years...worker...hoped it might be better for his kids...

MAN: The whole attitude is bad, and something should be done about it. And, you know, they really believe, if nothing ultimate is done about it...

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MAN: Every member, like, even in our local, just look it up, and you'll see the rate of death nearly every month, you got two, three - these are all young people, these are people in their, say, early fifties and early sixties. That's not so old.

MAN: Twenty-five years in this business they should pull you out.

MAN: There isn't too much you can do. I mean, the doctor told us the only thing to do is get out of the business. What can I do at my age?

MAN: My concern is to make the work place safe so you don't go to a guy and say, okay, we got fifty extra bucks, although you're going to die six months from now, or a year from now. It's a terrible method, that we use humans as guinea pigs when we should be using, really, guinea pigs. All technology is guilty until proved innocent. Every substance that's introduced into the work place, or to the environment in general, should be proven safe. It should be up to the consumers or the workers to evaluate.

MAN: ...kill half the world, what's the difference?

MAN: We'd like to thank Drs. Nicholson, Maxwell Maill and Irving Zelikoff; trade unionists Tony Masacci, Nick Buradovich, Jack Novak and Frank Schonfield; union members Tony Wilach, George Pritchard, Charles Kwestich, Mike Stiff, and Pete Sanders, and writer Paul Cadura for their contributions to this program.

WOMAN: This program was produced by Nick Eagleson and Bonnie Bellow, with technical direction by David Rapkin, and musical direction by James Ursay.

MAN: Listen, to make a buck they'll kill half the world, what's the difference?

NICK EAGLESON: My name is Nick Eagleson.

BONNIE BELLOW: This is Bonnie Bellow.

EAGLESON: We're in the studio now, and this part of the program is live. We're interested in taking calls from people that have had other experience with industrial health and safety problems. We're curious what other issues ought to be explored on radio. Our number is area code 212 371-5000.

BELLOW: So if there are people who have heard the program and are interested in calling up and discussing either this

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issue, the asbestos issue, or any other kind of related problem on the job that involved the health and safety of workers on the job, please, we'd like very much to hear from you and to talk about it.

EAGLESON: This is WSAI, and you're on the air. Hello? You're on the air.

MAN: Yes. I'm a construction worker myself, I just wanted to bring out one or two things...(INAUDIBLE)...

EAGLESON: Okay, go ahead.

MAN: Number one, here in New York they claim that they don't use asbestos any more, they have this substance called Capco 45. Now this substance is made out of animal fiber.

(CALLS ON REST OF PROGRAM CONCERNED OTHER SUBSTANCES)