

Asbestos whipsaw

Leaving asbestos dust to settle

By Hilary de Boerr

The best way to evacuate a building in North America is probably to mention the word asbestos. Since one tiny fibre of the fire-resistant insulating material can kill, that is not surprising. Asbestos was used in construction up to the mid-1970s, insulating pipes, boilers and ducts, sprayed on steelwork and incorporated in insulating board. It is found in abundance in public buildings and housing in most big cities.

The danger comes when asbestos fibres are released into the environment. Inhaled fibres can cause asbestosis, cancer and mesothelioma. There is no known cure for these diseases.

Throughout the 1980s, western nations developed stringent policies for dealing with asbestos. Some countries, like the US and Canada, required local authorities to dispose of asbestos in places like schools and government buildings.

Some people now believe, however, that the asbestos in buildings might have been safer left where it was. The Environmental Protection Agency in the US published its guidelines for "managing asbestos" last July, admitting that millions of dollars had been spent unnecessarily removing the material.

It recommends instead that the material be encapsulated or enclosed. Removal is recommended only during building demolition or renovation — or if the asbestos is damaged and already releasing fibres.

This sea-change is important because many companies follow the EPA's lead. Britain, France and Belgium are also moving away from widespread removal, recommending that undamaged asbestos be encapsulated, enclosed or simply left alone.

Encapsulation is a process whereby a durable non-toxic coating is painted or sprayed over the asbestos material — locking in the fibres and protecting it for several years from heat, cold and damage. The process maintains the fire-retarding and insulating qualities of asbestos which is still seen as the best material for withstanding high pressure, high temperatures and corrosive gases or liquids. (There

are synthetic products available to replace almost every application of asbestos.)

Enclosure means covering the asbestos with panels or walls, clearly marked to identify the dangerous substance.

Both are considerably cheaper than the high cost of removing asbestos. In New York, for example, \$300m is being spent to strip asbestos from public buildings including the World Trade Centre and John F Kennedy airport.

In Brussels, the European Commission headquarters is to be demolished because the \$70m bill to remove its asbestos is almost as costly as building a new structure. In London, one local council alone has spent £1.2m over the past six years to remove asbestos from its housing stock.

Even though encapsulation is internationally recognised, asbestos removal companies have continued to push removal for obvious reasons, says Peter Milstien, marketing director of Liquid Plastics, which manufactures an encapsulation product.

Asbestos removal is so expensive — and thus lucrative for removers — because strict codes of practice make it labour intensive and time consuming, and only specially licensed operators are allowed to remove it. The stripped asbestos is costly to dispose of, with many countries no longer willing to accept imports of such harmful waste material.

The most important reason for the change in asbestos guidelines is to prevent further asbestos-related deaths. One recent study estimated that asbestos in buildings would be responsible for only one death a year in the UK compared with one or two deaths per million caused by exposure to asbestos during its removal.

Nevertheless, the public perception that any asbestos is dangerous means removal will probably remain. Flora Madelino, vice-president of Donalco, the Ontario-based asbestos removal contractors, believes another 10 years of removal lie ahead. "There's still a lot of paranoia about it. I think there's a lot of asbestos being removed at great expense to the taxpayer that we certainly don't believe needs to be done."

By now we should be getting used to the whipsaw of scientific consensus. Shortly after we learn that Alar will poison apple-eating children, we learn that it won't. A similar swing on dioxin: The Environmental Protection Agency now acknowledges that it overestimated the dangers of the notorious chemical.

And so with asbestos, although the shifts in the consensus have been less like a whipsaw than a leaky faucet. Drip by drip the evidence accumulates: The asbestos scare of the early 1980s was overdone, resulting in much bad public policy, needless government spending and, in some communities, widespread panic.

The latest word comes from the Council on Scientific Affairs of the American Medical Association. Earlier this month it released a report emphasizing the lack of risk that undisturbed asbestos poses to occupants of buildings in which asbestos has been found. This puts the panel in line with EPA's policy, which recommends that intact asbestos, even in schools, be left in place.

Unfortunately, the EPA has not always been so sensible. It early signed on to the asbestos scare, embracing a now-discredited study that asbestos exposure could cause 40,000 "excess deaths" a year. (Most scientists place the number at less than 15, for extremely high exposure levels.)

EPA's initial policy, said former Director William Ruckelshaus, was meant to get "the mothers to form mobs to storm the school committees." The resulting asbestos removals from schools nationwide, many of them unnecessary, have cost those "school committees," and the taxpayers, millions of dollars.

Those in the vanguard of the scare once ranked mild asbestos exposure with smoking and alcoholism as a public health threat. The AMA panel dispenses with that notion — permanently, we hope: "Doctors must continue to drive home to the public the far greater causes of morbidity and mortality, such as smoking, drug and alcohol abuse, improper diet and inadequate exercise."

Thus the AMA-certified guide to a long life: Don't smoke, eat right, pump iron. And leave the asbestos alone.

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