Chrysotile Asbestos in Urban Air

THE industrial use of chrysotile asbestos is increasing and the question of whether its concentration in urban air constitutes a hazard has been raised. But measurements of asbestos in air near asbestos factories have proved negative with present analytical methods, so under the sponsorship of the Asbestosis Research Council we are developing a more sensitive technique. This article is a preliminary account of the estimation of chrysotile near a large asbestos textile factory at Rochdale, Lancashire. There are several uncertainties in the technique, so we were expecting to obtain only an order of magnitude estimate. Nevertheless this would have been an important figure to have because of the lack of data on the amount of asbestos in air. As it happened, we were only able to determine an upper limit for the chrysotile concentration which turned out to be three orders of magnitude lower than the threshold value for occupational exposure set by asbestos regulations. Obviously even more sensitive techniques are required and are now being developed.

We used an X-ray diffraction technique based on the measurement of the integrated area under the (002) peak of chrysotile. The equipment, which consisted of a Phillips 1010 generator, a vertical goniometer with a step scanning attachment, and a proportional counter with pulse height discrimination, could be reliably calibrated down to 10 μg of chrysotile compared with the 1 to 10 mg range reported by Crable[1], and was cross-checked by estimating the magnesium content of the calibration samples by atomic absorption spectroscopy. Sampling involved the collection of airborne solids from 1,000 m^3 (10^6 l.) of air by an electrostatic device (H. Litton Systems Inc.) in which up to 10,000 l. min^{-1} are drawn through a 20 kV corona discharge. Particles in the air are electrostatically precipitated onto a plate and concentrated into ~100 ml. of liquid.

The collection efficiency depends on the size distribution of the particles and the sampling rate, but the size distribution of chrysotile in the atmosphere is not known. Therefore we estimated the collection efficiency indirectly by running the sampler in part of the asbestos factory where a low concentration of asbestos is known to occur (Fig. 1) and we found the collection efficiency to be almost 100% when the air is sampled at about 2,000 l. min^{-1}, dropping to between 25 and 50% at the rate of 10,000 l. min^{-1}, depending on the actual size distribution present. As we were aiming at only an order of magni-