

Asbestos: not to worry

A sudden outbreak of reality has invaded the debate on asbestos in buildings and its alleged health hazards. Several scientific reports issued in recent weeks debunk much of the hysteria that has surrounded the subject.

A Harvard-connected symposium, which drew an international gathering of scientists, concluded that "the fear of asbestos in buildings among the general public is out of proportion to the existing health risk." The delegates further found that measurements of asbestos fibers in schools and commercial buildings "resemble those outside of urban community levels."

In fact, they found exposures to tobacco smoke and radon in some areas are between 200 and 400 times larger than even the most conservative (pessimistic) asbestos risk estimates.

Another, and more devastating report came from five scientists who concluded that more than 90% of the asbestos used in buildings is chrysotile. This type has short curly fibers that are easily expelled by human lungs. Their conclusion: no health risk.

Said the report's principal author, Dr. Brooke Mossman, "Quite frankly, if you want to prevent human health risks, don't focus on asbestos. Go to significant health risks in society, such as drugs, such as alcohol, such as tobacco smoke." Significantly, these two scientific reports were not funded by the asbestos industry, but were the product of independent scholars.

The biggest hazard with asbestos is to the workers who remove it, the scientists said. In other words, let sleeping asbestos lie.

The market implications of such new data are significant. The nation's school districts are under the gun to submit asbestos-removal plans to the Environmental Protection Agency. The schools must remove loose asbestos, at an estimated cost of up to \$6 billion. For schools, burdened as

they are with debt and finding increasing voter resistance to tax millages, any relief from the potential costs of removing asbestos will be welcome news.

For other uses of asbestos, such as commercial buildings, there has already been significant activity in removing the material. In some cases, building owners have spent a bundle to remove the material, either to avoid lawsuits, retain tenants, or to make their buildings more attractive to lease.

In other cases, tenants have used the asbestos issue to leverage better rental terms from landlords: remove the stuff or give us a break on our lease.

Case in point: A Detroit bank froze loans to those seeking to buy three closed-down Catholic churches after it became known that the EPA might require the buyers to pay for asbestos removal. This story could be multiplied thousands of times over, as the presence of asbestos in buildings becomes a key variable in all sorts of transactions.

The asbestos-removal industry was beginning to burgeon as more and more entrepreneurs entered the field. The obstacles to entry have been discouragingly high. The unionized sheet metal contracting sector has made a feeble attempt to tap this market, but little has actually been done. Most hvac contractors have shunned this type of business, worried about the potential litigation they face from the health hazards to workers. Inability to get insurance was also a big hindrance.

In 1986, Congress stopped short of empowering the EPA to take extreme measures on asbestos removal in buildings. Now, in the light of new scientific evidence, the agency should re-examine its school asbestos-removal program. There are many things wrong with America's schools — drugs, illiteracy, violence — but asbestos is not among them.

T.A.M

29 states sue over asbestos

By Mary Romano
USA TODAY

Twenty-nine states sued 26 asbestos companies in the U.S. Supreme Court Tuesday, saying the firms should be liable for the cost of removing asbestos from public buildings.

"The products installed in state buildings simply were not safe and the states must expend significant sums of money to provide a safe environment," said Kenneth Eikenberry, attorney general for Washington state.

"It's exceptionally unusual" for lawsuits to be filed with the nation's highest court, said Bruce Fein, a specialist in Supreme Court matters.

He said such a move is usually designed by attorneys general who want to be known as consumer advocates or "win kudos when they run for higher office."

Also, since the Supreme Court is not a trial court, Fein said "the likelihood of getting the court to accept it as original jurisdiction and try the case is zero or less."

The states sued because the issue "raises major public health, environment and finance issues," Eikenberry said in a statement.

About 733,000 buildings across the USA are believed to contain cancer-causing asbestos. The total cleanup cost has been estimated at \$53 billion.

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