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Use of asbestos

SIR: The journal *Science* published a study of medical experts who found that the "asbestos panic" may be leading to costly and unnecessary removal efforts. We were brainwashed into believing that asbestos is a very dangerous carcinogen. Nobody can dispute the fact that asbestos is an odorless, nontoxic mineral that does not give up any vapors. It is also the best filtering material.

Those who condemn the use of asbestos do not recognize that the number of fire deaths has sharply increased since insulation containing those fibers has been removed from many buildings and is not installed any more. They also seem not to know that many of the materials that replaced asbestos are far more dangerous to our health than it was. The carbon monoxide, nicotine, nail polish, fumes emanating from some kinds of carpeting and insulation materials, etc. that are circulated with the cooled or heated air of totally climate-controlled buildings are thousands of times more harmful to our lungs than floating asbestos fibers. Asbestos is retained by the air filters.

The employees in the Environmental Protection Agency headquarters outside Washington, D.C., get sick from inhaling the chemicals emanating from the

so-called safe wall and floor coverings. They have to go outside for extended periods to recover. Others had to take leaves of absence or could not return to work there.

If we are forced to spend more than \$30 billion to remove asbestos from public and private buildings, we should assume that asbestos is a major cause of death in the U.S. A 1986 statistic of causes of death does not even list the 12,000 people who, according to EPA claims, die annually from asbestos-related causes.

All persons who work in areas filled with enormous amounts of dust are at risk to be afflicted with lung diseases. Coal miners, flour millers, bakers, etc. fall into this category. If ever a school teacher or student would have come down with asbestosis, it would have made the national news.

A section of the MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour on Feb. 6 deplored the fact that the Johns Manville Trust Fund is unable to satisfy the outlandish claims of some suffering asbestos workers. The judge who tried these suits should have asked those men and the tort lawyers why they did not use common sense. Simple masks would have kept those rather coarse and long fibers out of their lungs. It is also a good bet that most of the afflicted claimants were heavy smokers.

The benefits of asbestos outweigh the dangers of early death by so much, that its use should be considered an acceptable risk—like trace amounts of carcinogens in our food and water supply.

There is a definitive need that the enforcers of the Delaney clause use common sense when they make their rulings. We ban substances that seem to cause cancer in highly inbred rats who are exposed to or fed unrealistically high quantities of the material to be tested. When minimal risks are outweighed by great benefits, the banning of the product should be decided by experts.

If the money spent on asbestos removal were used to improve education or to fight such deadly killers as the human immunodeficiency virus and hepatitis, life in this country could be improved.

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