

FILE NAME: General Motors (GM)

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Call to Dr. Merle E. Gibson

Feb. 6, 1996

He was Medical Director for Inland Division of General Motors from 1963-1990, is now in private practice in Dayton a mile away from the GM brake manufacturing plant. He also sees cases, including "lots" of asbestosis and related cancers, for the Ohio Bureau of Workers' Compensation.

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At GM, Gibson was in charge of 60 nurses, 5 industrial hygienists. He was responsible for 20,000 workers, 1000-2000 in brake products manufacturing. They conducted annual physicals, bought an electron microscope, did sputum studies for asbestos. At first, they thought that cancer was only a problem with asbestosis as a pre-condition. He became fascinated with asbestos, visited J-M "many times" including the asbestos mines, and worked 2 weeks with Selikoff, for whom he retains "great respect," in the 1970s. He says Selikoff told him that his research at GM made him one of the 10 leading U.S. experts on asbestos disease. One thing they studied was "brake stops" and their release of asbestos.

He attended "76 OSHA closing conferences," appeared in District Court, and even appeared before a Senate subcommittee after being coached "tremendously" by GM lawyers. (I think that last was on asbestos but am not sure of it.) He says he also handled tort ("that's a dirty word") litigation against GM.

Another use of asbestos was in firewalls of cars, which was converted to fiber-glass in the 1980s.

Dr. G. knew from 1963 that asbestos was a "vicious material" whose use warranted stringent control. Within a year of going to work for GM, he asked the GM Executive Committee to pay to install extensive dust controls inside the plant where asbestos was used. Despite the cost of \$7 million, "they bought right into it." Before that, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, conditions were controlled little if at all. Their annual screenings for asbestosis must have turned up cases, but I didn't ask about that.

Despite his willingness to speak with me and answer questions, he repeatedly emphasized his loyalty to GM.

He was most worried about the use of compressed air by brake mechanics to blow out brake dust, and **in the early 1960s** GM told its dealers to not use compressed air to blow out brakes, use suction and damp cloths instead, dust mask also mentioned. If this wasn't Gibson's idea, which I think it was, he sure is intimately familiar with it, recalling those details from so long ago. It would be interesting to see the various versions of the notice to GM dealerships that have gone out since 1963; at a 1985 meeting with EPA, the GM men said "GM recommends that its dealers use vacuum or wet methods during brake work" according to the EPA memo of the meeting of June 5, 1985.

He readily recalled the Jan. 1969 meeting with Dr. Wright and the asbestos industry guys. It was stormy, adversarial. The asbestos industry guys wanted GM to help present a united front, and Gibson was telling them GM could go to semi-metallic brakes and, "without much trouble" get out of asbestos altogether. That was an overstatement, probably, but the asbestos-free, semi-metallic brakes were well along by 1969. "We responded that if 1 fiber has X potential, a million fibers could have 100X potential" to cause cancer. "I represented GM in that meeting."

Later, measuring asbestos in ambient air, Dr. Gibson recalled that they found more asbestos in the ambient air than they had in the air inside the plant. He thought it was safer working in the asbestos area than in other areas of the plant where they used solvents, toluene diisocyanate, etc.

He says his library is crammed with asbestos literature. He thinks that Nicholson's estimate of 10,000 deaths a year from asbestos cancers is too low. He sees lots of lung cancer and suspects a role for asbestos in every one. On the other hand, he thinks chrysotile isn't that bad compared to amosite and seemed unaware that chrysotile as well had been implicated in household contact mesothelioma.

After the call, I slightly revised my text insert for the next edition of my book and sent it by fax, requesting same-day confirmation of the truth of the text, explaining that it was mainly referenced to J-M memos. Dr. Gibson faxed the text page back, signed, dated, and marked "Approved."