

## SPECIAL REPORT

### World Symposium on Asbestos, Part II

## Science must maintain neutral role

The question of rights and responsibilities pertaining to asbestos production and use was addressed by representatives of the scientific, industrial, labor and government sectors in England, Belgium and the U.K.

Oxford University epidemiologist Julian Peto was emphatic in stating that scientists should not adopt a position in the discussion of rights and responsibilities; their role, he said, should be to insist on the use of proper scientific data as a basis for any decisions made, and to prevent misinterpretation of data. At various times, he explained, scientific facts and figures have been misused by governments, labor and management alike. Until agreement has been reached on the degree of risk associated with asbestos exposure, claims made by any of these sectors regarding the safety (or lack of safety) of asbestos are not justifiable, he said.

Peto added that if governments — who have primary responsibility for (worker) protection — want truly valid answers concerning asbestos issues, they should seek from scientists detailed explanations of their work, rather than simply calling them in for brief presentations.

This form of scientific debate was supported by Anthony Mazzochi, international representative for the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers International Union. However, he stated, until scientists have resolved their differences on these issues, a moratorium on asbestos use should be declared.

In labor's view, governments have developed regulations aimed at controlling asbestos hazards, but have not followed up this development with implementation. Thus, stated Mazzochi, the promise of protection has been an illusion, since the means of its delivery has not been present. Litigation instigated by workers in the face of the ineffectiveness of legislation has done more to bring about removal of asbestos from the workplace and its replacement by substitute materials, and has also served to draw attention to the magnitude of the problem, he stated.

Speaking on behalf of the government side, John F. Martonik Jr of the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration pointed out that the agency's asbestos standard was the first standard promulgated by OSHA (in 1972). Since then, a massive amount of further information has been made available to OSHA concerning the

health effects of asbestos. This, combined with technological advances and the agency's 10 years of enforcement experience, has prompted OSHA to begin a re-examination of previous regulatory decisions concerning asbestos, with the objective of promulgating a revised asbestos standard, said Martonik.

### Controlled use supported

The industry viewpoint was presented by Etienne van der Rest, chairman of the governing council of the Asbestos International Association and of the Belgian Federation of Asbestos-Cement Industries. He strongly advocated the controlled use of asbestos, an option which would, he said, permit society to benefit from the positive features of the mineral (e.g. fire resistance) while seeking to eliminate as far as possible its problematic aspects.

Van der Rest went on to list both rights and responsibilities of the industry, beginning with the latter. First and foremost, he said, the industry is responsible for taking all necessary precautions to ensure that no socially unacceptable risk is created during the course of asbestos mining, milling and product manufacturing. Part of this responsibility includes maintaining fiber levels of 2 fibers/cm<sup>3</sup> or lower, he noted. It is also the industry's policy to urge adoption of this standard in countries where regulations in this area do not yet exist, he added.

The banning of asbestos use in applications where controlled use is not practically possible is supported by the industry as well, he noted. Seen as additional responsibilities are: the maintenance of an open dialogue with governments, unions and the medical and scientific sectors; the provision of information to workers concerning exposure risks and precautions; the implementation of plant monitoring and medical surveillance programs; and support, in terms of both time and money, of further research.

Van der Rest listed three basic rights sought by the industry: the right to be viewed as a legitimate industry rather than as an exploitive body operating solely in its own interests without regard for its workers, customers or society at large; the right to a reasonable degree of legislation which does not seek to impose technically and economically unachievable requirements without suffi-

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