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Cities Are Acting to Regulate Spraying of Asbestos

By MICHAEL KNIGHT

Several tons of it are sprayed into the air in American cities every year. Those who breathe its microscopic particles will carry it with them throughout life. And sometimes, 20 of 30 years later, the deadly effects —inability to breathe or rampant lung cancer—begin to be felt.

The substance is asbestos, a mineral whose fireproof fibers have long been matted into felt-like sheets. It is now increasingly being sprayed on the steel beams of high-rise buildings.

Cities around the country, often with the help of the asbestos workers unions, are beginning to regulate or ban the spraying of asbestos as the deadly and delayed effects of contact with it are becoming known.

Most endangered are the workers who install asbestos sheets around boilers and steam pipes or who spray it on automobile brakes or onto steel beams in construction.

But increasingly there is worry among health experts that the large amounts that are allowed to escape into the air during the spraying may affect thousands of residents.

When the new Missouri State office building in Kansas City was sprayed recently, "the stuff blew all over the devil," said Richard Maupin, business manager of Asbestos Workers Local 27.

"Some of it went all the way downtown," he said. "The stuff is really dangerous. People can see it, but they don't know it's harmful."

Industry publications estimate that 50 per cent of the asbestos used in spraying is lost into the air.

Inhalation of the asbestos dust forms deposits on the lungs that are never absorbed or broken down, scarring the tissues and blocking their ability to absorb oxygen. The resulting difficulty in breathing is a result of a condition called asbestosis, which is incurable and can be fatal.

According to Dr. Irving J. Selikoff, director of the Environmental Sciences Laboratory at Mount Sinai Medical Center here, people exposed to asbestos have much higher rate of lung and intestinal cancer than those never exposed to it. Smoking, Dr. Selikoff says, drastically increases the risk: people who smoke cigarettes and are exposed to the dust have a lung cancer rate 92 times higher than the statistical norm.

Even the wives of men who work with asbestos are endangered by the dust their husbands bring home on their clothes, according to Milton Goldberg, an environmental field engineer in the Allegheny County Department of Health in Pittsburgh.

"You can walk down a street where asbestos has been sprayed," he said, "and it may not affect you for 20 or 25 years."

Dr. Selikoff, probably the foremost national health authority on asbestos, said that as long ago as 1924 it was discovered that people who worked with asbestos developed scarred lungs. It took almost 30 more years of study, he said, to link it with cancer.

Boston and Chicago last May became the first cities in the country to ban the spraying of asbestos totally.

New York banned it from city projects a month later, and has severely restricted its use, as have Los Angeles, Detroit and Philadelphia. Other areas throughout the country are considering bans or regulations on spraying.

The regulations of the cities enforced by fines and punishment, are basically similar. They call for enclosing the work area in a tarpaulin and installation of adequate ventilation systems or the use of effective respirator face masks. The entire area, including walls and ceilings, must be vacuum-cleaned afterward to remove any dust that is left over.

In Los Angeles, John N. Jepson, state senior safety engineer, said that on occasion it has been necessary to shut down a construction job for a few days when the regulations were not followed.

"A few shutdowns on a big job brings the picture into clear focus and they generaly refrain from any further violations," he said.

The Chicago ordinance, the most stringent, totally bans asbestos spraying and calls for penalties, including six-month jail terms.

Also causing worry is the practice of lining the inside of air-conditioning ducts with asbestos to prevent the spread of fire. Dust, picked up by the moving air, is borne throughout the building. While there are as yet no regulations in this field, contractors are beginning to put the asbestos on the outside of the ducts or to use specially coated asbestos that locks the dust in.

Substitutes for asbestos are being found in cement and fiberglass products.

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