

Debunking Madison Ave

While asbestos protects against many hazards in our technological society, its use presents other serious hazards. Most vulnerable are the miners and factory workers who have an abnormally high propensity towards lung and cancer diseases, presumably caused by long-term asbestos fiber inhalation. When asked why their ad fails to deal with this subject, one representative of Johns-Manville said, "I don't believe asbestos is hazardous to the general public." Current studies indicate, however, that the dangers of asbestos dust can extend to non-workers. One 1969 report on pollutants by Litton Systems, Inc., estimates that 100,000 asbestos workers, 3.5 million workers in related industries, and approximately 50 million other Americans have been exposed to asbestos and could have fibers in their lungs.

Asbestos is unique. Given its strength, heat resistance, flexible fibers, and adsorption powers, it is not surprising that industrialists have found an estimated 3,000 uses for this material, many of which are found in the average household. Asbestos cement pipe and board are used for sewage pipelines, wallboards, and roof partitions. Asbestos plastics, friction products, and textiles can function as ironing board covers, floor tiles, brake and kiln linings, filters for beer or medicines, fireproof rugs and curtains, etc. Asbestos spray and paper insulation protect boilers, pipes, and even manhole covers from vibration, heat and fire.

But before other workers can put asbestos fibers to constructive use, asbestos workers must refine the mineral deposits into manageable, marketable forms. And far from enjoying the protective qualities of asbestos themselves, they are continually exposed to possible inhalation of asbestos dust. Once loose airborne fibers lodge in the lungs, they remain there permanently.

Johns-Manville, the largest U.S. manufacturer of asbestos products, now admits that there are occupational hazards associated with the continuous inhalation of asbestos fibers. They have contributed funds for a research program on workers' health being lead by Dr. Irving Selikoff, Professor of Environmental Medicine at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York and a leading authority on asbestos hazards. But as late as 1962, Dr. Selikoff wrote to many of the largest asbestos manufacturers in the United States and was unable to obtain employee health records from any of them. Only when he contacted the Asbestos Workers Union did he find cooperation to begin extensive studies of workers.

It may seem odd that Johns-Manville does not mention their research efforts in their promotional advertisement. But mention of any health hazards might interfere with Johns-Manville's current efforts to disclaim any responsibility or even knowledge of possible hazards to those outside of the work environment.

Furthermore, in spite of recorded lung diseases in asbestos workers as far back as early Greek history, industry has not succeeded in lowering the high number of disease victims each year. As early as 1924, Dr. W.E. Cooke, an English physician, coined the word "asbestosis" to describe the unusual fibrous lung scarring which had been found in several asbestos workers. By 1955, a suspected link between asbestos fiber inhalation and lung cancer was strongly supported by Richard S. Gull's report that workers exposed to heavy concentrations of asbestos dust for over twenty years had approximately 12 times more lung cancer than expected.

Then, in 1960, studies by Dr. J. Christopher Wagner in one asbestos mining area in South Africa revealed 49 cases of mesothelioma, an extremely rare cancer of the chest or abdominal cavity usually found in only one out of 10,000 autopsies. By 1961, Wagner had diagnosed 69 mesothelioma cases, and all but two had had some exposure to asbestos. In an article in *Environment* magazine

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March 1969, Dr. Selikoff said that the mesothelioma tumors, longer rare, are so common among asbestos workers "as to also constitute a tumor specific to asbestos exposure."

In spite of Dr. Selikoff's belief that all asbestos could be mined, and in spite of Johns-Manville's claim that they now have effective monitoring and ventilation equipment, one out of five asbestos workers still dies of lung cancer, one out of ten of asbestosis, one out of ten of mesothelioma, and one out of ten of gastrointestinal cancer.

To deal with the increasing public awareness of these medical findings, Johns-Manville's latest promotional effort was to join with seven other asbestos products manufacturers to form the Asbestos Information Association/North America (AIA/NA). It operates from ERI and Knoxville, Tenn., a large public relations firm in New York. In their first press release dated March 2, 1970, AIA/NA explained that "some scientists, government officials, and writers have made an illogical jump" in assuming that asbestos is hazardous to the general public.

...it is entirely possible, then, that members of the general public may unknowingly inhale sufficient numbers of asbestos fibers to increase their susceptibility to cancer.

Legislation has not yet been very effective. The Occupational Health and Safety Act of 1970 only passed with modification weakening its effect. And though a standard of five fibers per cubic centimeter is recommended, the threshold limit for airborne fibers remains at five million particles per cubic foot, an old standard incapable of reducing disease levels to expected rates.

But Johns-Manville can make some improvements without legislative assistance. At present, there are approximately 15 hygienists in four hygiene labs responsible for monitoring the environment of all of Johns-Manville's 21,000 workers and for controlling dust emissions. Such a staff is appallingly inadequate. Mr. Edward Fenner, Director of Environmental Control at Johns-Manville, knew of no worker education programs as such, though they are listed by AIA/NA as a control. Safety meetings are held, but they may be as short as five minutes each week. No specifics were available from the company on the amount of monitoring equipment actually in use, the selection and percentage of workers monitored, or the regularity of monitoring on each job.

If Johns-Manville, with an expressed interest in workers health, is unable to state specifically how control procedures are carried out, what protection is guaranteed the general public for which the company does not yet feel responsible?

Unprotected demolition of buildings can release large amounts of asbestos dust. Uncontrolled spraying of asbestos by insulation workers on construction sites is a potential danger to other workers and passers-by. Several cities may follow Philadelphia's example and ban the process altogether. For fifteen years, Mr. Albert Hutchinson, international president of the Asbestos Workers Union, has been pointing out the hazards of asbestos placed inside air ducts as insulation. Fibers will gradually erode and be dispersed by the central air conditioning system to affect everyone working within the modern high-rise building.

In fact, the presence of fibers in the lungs during routine autopsies led Dr. Selikoff to state over a year ago: "I can say now that people who live in cities have asbestos in their lungs." While most scientists currently believe that low-level exposure to asbestos is harmless, the possibility that portions of the public are highly exposed need further research.

In several places in the facts folder, AIA/NA states that there is no evidence that anyone "in the general public has ever contracted any disease from exposure to wearing or weathering of brake linings, floor tile, roofing, wall or ceiling panels, or similar asbestos-containing items."

True, most asbestos products intended for general public use, such as the clothing in the ad, are coated and therefore not considered harmful. The fibers remain "locked in" as long as the material is not torn or ripped apart during use. But the products containing loose fibers which are also marketed to the public are never mentioned. And several cases of mesothelioma have been reported in people who have had only limited exposure to asbestos years before. One 14-year old boy had helped his father cut plasterboard for a remodeling job. Another man had sprayed asbestos on boilers in his home. Other times, asbestos workers brought fibers home on their clothing. Insecticides, fertilizers, and talcum cornettes have all been known to contain loose asbestos fibers. It has even been reported that some kindergarten children were allowed to mix asbestos fibers with water as a clay substitute.

In all of these cases, the persons in contact with loose asbestos dust could have been warned to use caution and proper ventilation. If Johns-Manville would admit possible hazard to the public and suggest safety precautions, they would not have to fight the public relations battle they are creating for themselves.

—Avery Taylor

health hazard. Mr. Harold McNabb from Certain-Feed Products Corporation, now president of AIA/NA, said the formation of the new group represents "the industry's efforts to close our side of the information gap." But certainly a gap exists if the industry does not feel obligated to warn the public of the dangers associated with heavy fiber inhalation.

In a facts folder on asbestos and health recently distributed by AIA/NA, asbestosis is described as a disease that develops in workers "only after inhalation of excessive concentrations of asbestos dust over a period that averages 17 years....(It) does not occur among the general population." But this statement is qualified by the fact that early detection is not yet possible; we cannot detect the fine coating until it has built up over ten to twenty years. In other words, though the condition is now termed "asbestotic" it is detectable the first year or two before.

Furthermore, Wagner's studies showed that many of those with mesothelioma were not workers themselves; some had lived in workers' families; others had lived and played near mills and