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THE TRAGIC TOLL OF ASBESTOSIS

MEMORIES REFRESHED BY THE M.O.H.

DEALING with social conditions in Barking in his annual report for 1946, just issued, Dr. C. Leonard Williams, medical officer of Health for the borough, makes the following observations:—

Those who in this way or in that have been forced to take an interest in the tragic incidence of asbestosis in Barking may wish to refresh their memories of what was done in the town during the years 1928-1930 by reference to my earlier annual reports.

For the purposes of this annual report, I would wish to quote only from my annual report for 1930. On page 19 of this report I wrote as follows: "It is not unreasonable to suppose that for the next 15 years we shall be getting death from asbestosis amongst those people whose lungs are already affected."

The 15 years which in 1930 I thought would see the tragic end of so many of these then affected people have come and gone and we still have deaths in Barking from Asbestosis.

I can well believe that some of the deaths occurring to-day are due to the inhalation of asbestos dust more than 15 years ago, but my records are not sufficient for me to say whether some of the deaths occurring to-day are not due to or aggravated by the inhalation of dust during the past 15 years. In this connection, I am tempted to quote from another annual report, to wit my report for 1929, where on page 64, I wrote as follows: "The fact that the health of workers in factories is under one Ministry and the health of these same workers outside the factories is under another Ministry is essentially bad."

To-day, I am afraid that such a statement might be held to be verging very dangerously on policy. Perhaps I was more courageous when I was young, perhaps the times have changed, but there can be no doubt that what I said in 1929 is still as true to-day as it was then.

I am not in a position to assess the essential necessity of asbestos and its products to our national economy, but I am firmly of the opinion that it is a deadly and dangerous commodity and that unless those who are charged with the responsibility of safeguarding the health of the people in the industry can give positive assurances that they have now after all these years removed every possible danger, the processing of asbestos, except in so far as its products are essential to our national economy, should be barred.