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Exposure of Sailors to Asbestos Alleged

Had Very Little Protection on Job, Seaman With Lung Disease Claims

BY BILL RICHARDS
The Washington Post

WASHINGTON—A Navy seaman, who was diagnosed recently as having the early stages of asbestos disease, has said that he and other sailors were required to work with little protection in a ship's engine room where they were heavily exposed to the cancer-causing mineral.

Ironically, the seamen were part of a Navy program to rip out all asbestos from its older ships after it became known that asbestos can produce lung cancers and other potentially fatal lung disease.

"The Navy hired civilian contractors to come in and rip the stuff out and they wouldn't work unless they had respirators and other protective equipment," said Krishna V. N. Rao, a seaman assigned to the destroyer USS Towers. "But we were told to sweep up after them and the only protection we had were cotton gauze masks we borrowed on our own from the civilian workers."

Rao said enlisted men on the ship routinely handled asbestos during repair work before the Towers was taken in last year to the Long Beach Naval Shipyard to have all its asbestos removed.

Rao said he went AWOL from the ship after the Navy refused to accept medical reports from several well-known experts on asbestosis that he had the disease. Instead, he was ordered back to his previous job in the ship's engine room where asbestos removal was going on after a Navy physician suggested that persons of Indian extraction had lower lung capacity.

Copies of the medical reports and other documents related to the case were made available to the Washington Post.

The Navy is currently facing more than $1 billion in lawsuits from civilian shipyard workers who claim they were harmed by asbestos exposure during construction and repair work at various naval shipyards. A study of more than 6,000 workers at the Long Beach shipyard last year showed at least 31% with more than 17 years on the job had asbestosis.

The disease involves an irreversible scarring of lung tissue by asbestos fibers and is often fatal.

Rao's case has raised concern among some experts because his exposure to asbestos during his 3½-year hitch on the Towers was unusually short for asbestosis signs to appear.

Documents obtained by Rao also indicate that despite widespread public awareness of the dangers posed by asbestos for the last decade the senior officers on the Towers said they were never told of the hazard by the Navy until the middle of last year.

Dr. Irving J. Selikoff, a nationally known asbestos expert who diagnosed asbestosis in Rao, said it also raised serious question about other sailors exposed to asbestos on board their ships.

Two other experts, Dr. Roscoe C. Young, head of the Harden Pulmonary Laboratory at Howard University, and Dr. Thomas F. Mosher, a San Diego physician who examined Rao at the Navy's request, both said the 24-year-old seaman was suffering from early stages of asbestosis.

A Navy medical board of review has rejected the doctors' diagnoses on the grounds that Rao's exposure was too short to have caused the disease. A Navy adviser to the board noted Rao's Indian background and said that natives of India often have poorer lung function than other nationalities.

Rao, who was born in Philadelphia, said he has never been to India. In an interview, his mother, Dr. Charo Rao, said that she sent Navy authorities medical literature which indicated Indians of the height and weight of her son did not have any unusual lung problems.

In a letter last June 27 the Navy's surgeon general, Vice Adm. W. P. Arentzen, explained to Dr. Rao the Navy's position on asbestos and her son's case. The Navy, Arentzen wrote, had instituted "stringent precaution ashore and afloat" to eliminate sailors' exposure to airborne asbestos.

Arentzen said Rao's 3½ years on the Towers was too short a period to develop asbestoeis without exposure to unusually high levels of asbestos dust.

"We have not been able to substantiate such levels in the day-to-day operations of our ships," the admiral said.

Rao said that during his four-year Navy hitch aboard the Towers he and other crewmen constantly handled asbestos while they worked in the ship's engine room.

"We had to pull it off pipes and valves and other equipment," he said. "Sometimes it just crumbled and left the area where we were working looking like a blizzard of snow. It was like a fine dust in the air when you looked at the lights."

Despite heavily publicized warnings about the potential danger from asbestos going back to 1964, Rao said the crew was never told by the Navy about the danger from the material or given protective equipment. The first they learned of asbestos hazards was from television announcements and from civilian workmen who came on board last year, he said.

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