

FILE NAME: Newspaper & Magazine Articles (NMA)

DATE: 1978 Dec 3

DOC#: NMA132

DOCUMENT DESCRIPTION: Kansas City Star - Workers Paid Deadly Price for Industrial Progress - Part 2 of 3

Workers Paid Deadly Price for Industrial Progress

ASBESTOS:
DEATH BY FIBER
Second of Three Articles



By Nick Lyman
A member of the Staff

Julius Caesar may have been carrying an asbestos shield when he marched across the Rubicon and ushered in the Roman Empire. Nebuchadnezzar may have lined his furnace with it before he started immolating Israelites.

Asbestos has been around a long time—even ancient civilizations recognized its heat-resistant properties.

But it didn't appear in modern times until the last two decades of the 19th century—when it was first used to make heat- and acid-resistant fabrics. Western civilization was in the throes

of an industrial revolution when a huge vein of asbestos was discovered in 1878 in Quebec, Canada.

The first recorded case of asbestosis was found in England 28 years later, according to researchers. In 1918 it was reported that American and Canadian insurance companies refused to insure asbestos workers because of what they regarded to be unhealthy conditions in that industry.

The word asbestosis was used in 1927 to describe the "curious bodies" spotted in the lungs of older asbestos workers. The first American case of the disease—also known as "white lung" disease—was reported in 1930.

In its heyday, asbestos was used in more than 3,500 products—including insulation, brake linings, adhesives, paper, textiles and craft supplies. Officials estimate that as many as 11 million workers were exposed to the microscopic fibers.

But despite all of this, it was not until 1941 that it became generally known that asbestos can contribute to, or sometimes cause, cancer. That research was conducted by Dr. Irving Selikoff, regarded as one of the country's leading authorities on occupational diseases, at the Mount Sinai Hospital School of Medicine. Later research by Selikoff disclosed

that asbestos also can contribute to other forms of cancer, and that exposure for as short a period as one day can lead to cancer.

The problem with studying the effects of asbestos, as Selikoff and other researchers have pointed out, is the long latency period. It may take anywhere from 15 to 40 years after exposure to asbestos for the disease to appear. Asbestos began to be used in about 1880, they point out, but the first recorded case of asbestosis didn't show up until 1906.

"When someone gets cancer 40 years after he worked in an asbestos plant," Selikoff says, "it's hard to prove that it was the asbestos that caused it." See UNIONS on Page 5

★ Unions Claim Industry Ignored Menace

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factory, who's to say whether it was the asbestos that caused it?" one official at the Environmental Protection Agency asked.

The answer is that nobody can say for sure—but scientists have been able to show that persons exposed to asbestos have a much higher incidence of cancer and asbestosis—"white lung" disease.

Some of three workers are having trouble collecting damages or compensation after developing cancer because it's hard for them to prove that their work with asbestos years before, laid the groundwork for the disease.

It is estimated there are more than 12 billion in claims involving asbestos-related disease before the courts today.

In April the federal government estimated that as many as 5.6 million persons may die of cancer and other diseases as a direct result of exposure to asbestos in the workplace. This figure doesn't even begin to touch on those family members and neighbors who were exposed to asbestos fibers brought home by workers.

It also doesn't include the thousands of persons now working, shopping or going to school in buildings that contain asbestos insulation that is crumbling and falling into the atmosphere.

Officials of the Asbestos Workers Union have developed a special program to investigate cases of asbestos-related disease, examine all of the union's past and present members, educate people about the dangers of asbestos and lobby for national legislation to aid the workers and ban asbestos. It is called the Insulation Health Hazard Program of the Asbestos Workers International.

A spokesman in Washington said, "Fifty percent of our deaths (of union members) are caused by asbestos-related disease."

Those diseases include, besides "white lung" and more common cancers, a peculiar type of cancer known as mesothelioma. Union spokesmen said the disease is a rare cancer of the lining of the stomach and chest and apparently is caused by asbestos that lodges there. No cure is known.

The union also has detailed cases of 123 wives and children of members who came down with asbestos-related diseases, allegedly from microscopic fibers brought home on workers' clothing.

There also is the problem of adequate compensation. Union officials say their members aren't getting it.

Men and women who contract asbestos-related diseases are being browbeaten into settling for less money than they deserve," an official said.

"One man's medical bill was for \$85,000. He got lung cancer. Well, the state would pay \$1,500. And the asbestos company wanted to settle for a measly \$5,000."

Another union official, who said he lost two friends to cancer, was bitter about this alleged lack of compensation. "When they wear them (work clothes) out, they throw them in the corner and get a new piece of equipment," he said. "National legislation seems to be the answer."

There are those who disagree, saying it's impossible to pay full compensation to every asbestos worker who ever contracts cancer. There is no need for national legislation, they argue, because asbestos is rarely used these days and is safely sealed when it is.

The union also has been charging for years that the asbestos industry was fully aware of the dangers of asbestos in the 1920s—and kept it covered up.

Earlier this month, the Washington Post reported that lawyers for asbestos workers seeking medical compensation have come into possession of documents suggesting that the union is correct in its suspicion.

The Post said letters and documents involving two of the largest asbestos companies show how they kept off-

the leadership to suppress information concerning the hazardous effects of asbestos.

To The Star Tuesday—What is being done today to relieve some of the problems caused by asbestos? What new regulations is the federal government considering? Are there any state programs to pinpoint sources of asbestos and do something about it? Is asbestos a serious threat in Kansas City?

The Kansas City Star
12-4-78