FILE NAME: Asbestos Sacks and Bags (ASB)

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Ministry of Labour,
Baynards House,
1-13, Chepstow Place,
Westbourne Grove,
London, W.2.

28th October, 1965.

Our reference: SHW 3787/65.

Dear Mr. Bennett,

The Factory Inspectorate have now completed their investigations into the handling of asbestos in the docks, which were put in hand following complaints in July about the dusty conditions in one particular vessel in the London docks. The National Amalgamated Stevedores and Dockers Union then obtained medical advice from Dr. Hunter of the Institute of Clinical Research, Middlesex Hospital, to the effect that men working in the hold and in the barges needed to wear a mask in order to protect them from the asbestos dust. Provision of vacuum suction to remove any spillage during unloading was also recommended. The Inspectorate do not disagree with these recommendations. Such precautions are probably necessary in the conditions which were found on the ship in question, as asbestos was being unloaded in unsealed hessian sacks. When other forms of packaging are used, the Inspectorate's view, based on the investigations described below, is that masks are unnecessary. The dockers themselves can do much to maintain satisfactory conditions by careful unloading of the cargo.

The danger of developing asbestosis has been appreciated for many years. The asbestos textile industry has been subject to controlling Regulations since 1931. Asbestosis also affects other workers using asbestos, or materials containing asbestos, and measures to control more adequately the use of such materials are currently being considered by the Factory Inspectorate. The Inspectorate knows, however, of no case of asbestosis attributable to employment in the docks unloading asbestos. Similarly, no cases in such workers have been diagnosed by the Pneumoconiosis Medical Panels.

Most dockers are only intermittently or occasionally exposed to asbestos, but to determine whether conditions during unloading were such as to make the development of asbestosis likely or possible, given sufficient length of exposure, a series of investigations into the amount of air-borne asbestos has now been undertaken by the Chemical Inspectors of the Inspectorate. It should be understood that the significant portion of asbestos dust which is of a size capable of penetrating to the ultimate structures of the lung may not correspond to the amount visible to the unaided eye.

The outcome of these tests is to indicate that the amount of air-borne dust of respirable size has been below the published upper limit of safety where hessian sacks with an impervious lining, or laminated paper bags, or other impervious bags, have been in use, and it has also been below the limit when unlined hessian sacks were used and a slow rate of working has been in operation. The limit has been exceeded where unlined hessian sacks were used and the rate of working was normal. The Inspectorate's opinion is that with the normal intermittent exposure likely to be experienced by dockers, the risk of a docker developing clinically recognisable asbestosis is slight, provided impervious sacks are used. As they are unlikely to develop asbestosis, then they are no more liable to develop a lung cancer than the rest of the population.

Discussions are proposed with the importers of asbestos on the elimination of unsealed hessian sacks and the ultimate possibility of palletting as an alternative means of handling.

D. L. Bennett, Esq.,
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