

## WHY ASBESTOS ?

A Presentation Before the  
Asbestos Textile Institute  
Arlington, Virginia - June 7, 1973

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I am sure that many of you have asked yourselves, as I have asked myself, why has the asbestos industry seemingly been singled out as the prime target for so many assaults by government, labor, the press, certain segments of the medical profession, and by various environmental and consumer activist groups?

Why us? Can asbestos really be all that bad? Are the products we produce truly going to kill millions of Americans, as some experts have predicted? Or is there some sort of nefarious conspiracy afoot to destroy the asbestos industry?

The answer to the question of "Why us" is both complex and simple. Complex because it is a combination of three interrelated but separate factors. Simple because each of the factors is, when considered by itself, quite obvious.

The three factors are (1) asbestos can cause disease, (2) a spokesman arose to champion the need for asbestos control, and (3) a cornucopia of new government agencies were set up to control materials and products that can cause disease. Let us look at each of these factors in turn.

First, there is no doubt that the inhalation of substantial amounts of asbestos can lead to increased rates of various types of lung disease, including two forms of cancer. These are facts which cannot be denied, even if they do not apply in all circumstances and under all conditions. The medical literature is full of solid evidence linking asbestos to disease. In my office, I have on file more than 2,000 medical papers dealing with the health risks of asbestos and hundreds more are published every year.

Secondly, the spreading of concern over the health risks of asbestos has as its prime spokesman one of the most talented medical publicists of the age -- Dr. Irving J. Selikoff of New York's Mount Sinai Hospital. Not only is Dr. Selikoff capable of arousing the ire and moral indignation of the most conservative reporter or politician with his graphic descriptions and predictions of the ravages of asbestos, but he has also surrounded himself with a group of similarly talented associates who have carried the Mount Sinai message to the far corners of the nation.

While Dr. Selikoff has, in his zeal, unquestionably painted a far darker picture than the facts warrant, we should always remember in his defense that the insulation workers he has been studying for

more than a decade were and still are dying from asbestos related disease at an appalling rate. Such a situation would be sufficient to make a crusader out of the most conservative of scientists.

Finally, in the past decade there has been a tremendous growth in public and governmental interest in environmental and occupational health matters. This interest has been translated into a series of far-reaching laws affecting industry in a manner hitherto unknown in this or any other country. I believe it is accurate to say that these new laws, such as the Occupational Safety and Health Act, the Clean Air Act, the Consumer Product Safety Act, and others, have forever altered the concept of the free enterprise system as it was known in this country for a hundred and fifty years.

Thus, in combination, these three factors created a situation in which a cadre of freshly created federal agencies, with strong statutory authority, were prodded into assigning priority status to asbestos by Dr. Selikoff and his followers, who achieved these ends through skillful use of the great wealth of negative asbestos-health data contained in the medical literature.

In short, the asbestos industry was singled out because it was vulnerable to attack, because there was someone willing to lead that attack, and because Congress had graciously provided the vehicles for such an assault.

The background of industry efforts to deal with the asbestos-health problem as a national issue goes back nearly a decade, to Dr. Selikoff's now famous 1964 seminar on asbestos disease at the New York Academy of Sciences. While this seminar did much to prick the industry's conscience about asbestos and health, the problem still remained one of limited public and press interest until around 1967, when the media began beating the medical bushes searching for stories that would graphically portray American industry's supposed disregard for the environment and for the health and safety of its workmen and the American public. The asbestos-health problem was found to be tailor-made for such stories. As a result, starting with Paul Brodeur's infamous New Yorker article of March 1968, asbestos has since grown into an item of major press interest.

In those years, industry efforts to combat the spate of negative press articles on asbestos were carried on primarily by the Johns-Manville Corporation, which set up a task force of specialists in various fields to do what it could to portray the problem in its proper perspective. While some minor successes were achieved, it was found that no one company acting independently could adequately or effectively represent an entire industry in dealing with the press and with government officials.

As a result, in late 1970, eight companies gathered in New York City to launch the Asbestos Information Association of North America,