Editorial

# Asbestosis

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Editor

The first documented death from asbestos was in 1906. The first diagnosis of asbestosis in 1924. Asbestos was widely used as an insulation material in shipbuilding and other industries. The risks associated with all forms of it were increasingly well-documented through the 1930s, 40s, 50s and 60s; and by the 1980s regulations limiting or prohibiting its use started appearing around the world. Today its use is banned in 52 countries. Asbestos has six primary sub-classifications: chrysotile, crocidolite, amosite, anthophyllite, tremolite, and actinolite. Among these, chrysotile and amosite asbestos are the most common. Exposure to asbestos makes you more prone to cancer-like diseases linked to asbestos, not just poor shanty-dwellers, but the rich and powerful as well – air-borne asbestos particles being unable to differentiate between poverty and wealth.

According to the National Cancer Institute, "A history of asbestos exposure at work is reported in about 70 percent to 80 percent of all cases. However, mesothelioma has been reported in some individuals without any known exposure to asbestos."[1]

According to OSHA, "there is no 'safe' level of asbestos exposure for any type of asbestos fiber.[2, 3] Asbestos exposures as short in duration as a few days have caused mesothelioma in humans. Every occupational exposure to asbestos can cause injury or disease; every occupational exposure to asbestos contributes to the risk of getting an asbestos related disease."

Asbestos exposure becomes an issue if asbestos containing materials become airborne, such as due to deterioration or damage. Building occupants may be exposed to asbestos, but those most at risk are persons who purposely disturb materials, such as maintenance or construction workers. Housekeeping or custodial employees may be at an increased risk as they may potentially clean up damaged or deteriorated asbestos containing materials without knowing that the material contains asbestos. Asbestos abatement or remediation workers and emergency personnel such as firefighters may also become exposed.[4] Asbestos-related diseases have been diagnosed in asbestos workers' family members, and in residents who live close to asbestos mines or processing plants.[5]

Now with the effects of asbestos so well known, in a country like ours, with such a crippled infrastructure, several things often go neglected. Health and safety practices within factories are often inadequate. Dumping of residues and waste products is improperly monitored and, most worryingly, new residential sites are often built on land that was zoned as industrial but was illegally converted to residential plots. No effort is made to check the land near industrial areas for any sources or signs of contamination, and if miraculously, a source is found, nothing whatsoever is done to clear it of Chrysotile asbestos.

Greed, gross incompetence, the failure to implement safe working practices where a dangerous substance is involved, and a willful disregard for the well-being of the public are all obstacles to the prevention of asbestosis. Asbestos is a killer and has been known to be such since the beginning of the 20th century. And Asbestosis is public health problem of almost unimaginable proportions – and wholly preventable. Every effort now needs to be made to at least mitigate the effects of asbestos, with mass-screening in places close to industrial areas, as a baseline intervention, rigid implementation of health regulations and routine checking of any factories working with asbestos to ensure they follow all safety regulations, and that the residues and waste they dump do not contain any harmful or toxic substances.

## REFERENCES

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