

THE DAILY HAZARD

What is the Hazards Centre?

"What sort of hazards do you mean?" is the first question many people ask when they hear about the London Hazards Centre. Answer: "Any chemical or physical hazard about which Londoners need information in order to apply effective pressure for its removal."

The Centre aims to provide information on all types of hazards — in the workplace, at home or outside.

"Who do you give advice to?" is often the second question asked. The priority is to give advice to groups of people — such as trade unionists, tenants or community groups — who are organising around a particular hazard.

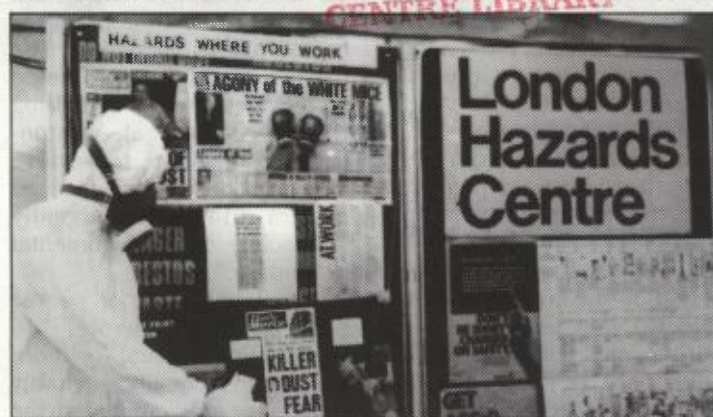
While some groups may already have access to information on hazards through their local law centre, advice centre or trade union, the London

Hazards Centre aims to fill the gaps in the resources — particularly for people who don't have the resources to pay commercial rates.

We aim at the London Hazards Centre to provide information as free from technical jargon as possible, so that people feel confident that they understand the nature of the hazard and can make informed decisions about the best way of dealing with the problem.

The Centre is equipped to measure chemical and physical hazards, where an analytical assessment is necessary, and to advise on appropriate control measures.

"Who works at the London Hazards Centre?" The five Centre workers operate as a collective, sharing their skills and responsibilities. We have all had trade union or community experience of one sort



The GLC's "Jobs for a Change" festival on 9 June

or another, and our paid employment has included such jobs as toxicology research, local authority health and safety work, medical and scientific publishing, teaching, and radiation research.

"Who funds the London Hazards Centre?" The GLC is funding the Centre until March 1985, paying the salaries of the

five workers, and providing money for premises and the day-to-day running of the Centre, as well as for equipment.

In addition, with our grant we are able to pay for library and technical facilities available at the Polytechnic of the South Bank, where the Centre is based.

Queries from asbestos to X-rays

Asbestos is the major hazard to London's residents and workers, judging from the inquiries received so far by the London Hazards Centre. In its first four months of operation, about 35 per cent of people or groups wanted advice on asbestos identification or removal — on estates, in schools and in workplaces.

Next on the list comes new technology — in particular, the problems arising from spending a lot of time right in front of a visual display unit (VDU). Many trade unionists in London seem concerned to

anticipate such problems as headache, eyestrain and stress before VDUs are installed, rather than later when unacceptable working practices are already established.

Below is an alphabetical list of the topics that the Centre workers had dealt with at the time of going to press:

asbestos contractors
asbestos identification
asbestos stripping
asbestos substitutes
asbestosis
carbon tetrachloride
cement hazards
chemical laboratory fire
chemical mould treatments
chemical storage
chemicals for water purification
contracted-out toxic waste disposal
cook'n'chill catering
dark-room ventilation
dust-dust exposure

electrical explosion
electronics
industry hazards
ergonomic office furniture
Evo-Stik
fibreglass
fluorescent lighting
glassfibre-reinforced plastics
hazard monitoring equipment
health & safety databases
health & safety legislation
health & safety literature
hospital hazards
humidity
insulating materials
imported coal hazards
lead pipes
lead in paint
Lindane
metal plating
mica
mice infestation
microwave radiation
negative ionisers
new technology

noise at work
office hazards
office overcrowding
paint thinners
paper dust
photocopier hazards
photographic chemicals
pigeon droppings
printing inks/chemicals
radioactive thyroid drugs
reproductive hazards
seating in shops
solvent exposure
sound insulation
stress
Tippex
tuberculosis
tyre reclamation
pollution
UV sunbeds
vehicle exhaust fumes
ventilation
visual display units
wax strip emulsion polish
welding hazards
wood preservatives
X-rays

SPOT NEWS

Heaters blow dust

● A survey by Lewisham Energy Centre of the Lethbridge Close Estate in Lewisham found that exactly half the tenants responding to their questionnaire complained that the heating units blew dust out into the home.

The London Hazards Centre is advising the tenants' association on possible hazards from the Enviwarm ducted storage heaters. This type is known to contain large amounts of asbestos board.

The cost of asbestos

● The case for government action on the cost of asbestos removal, now placing a heavy burden on local authority finances, will be made at a GLC-sponsored conference at County Hall on 15 November.

New exhibition

● Lesley Mitchell, community photographer on the Loughborough Estate in Lambeth, is putting together an exhibition telling how the tenants won removal of asbestos from the estate. She hopes to have the show ready for the GLC's asbestos conference in November. If you want more information write to her at the Community Centre, Wooley House, Barrington Road, SW9.

DHSS office survey

● In June, brown asbestos was identified by the London Hazards Centre in the heating system of a DHSS office in Streatham. Following union pressure, the DHSS is carrying out a full asbestos survey of the whole building.

"Completed" stripping

● Employees at the British Council in Portland Place spotted some white dust in a doorway after asbestos stripping operations had been "completed" in July. They walked out, and contacted the London Hazards Centre who found the premises were contaminated with asbestos debris. The area had to be cleaned several times over the next week or so before staff could re-enter the building.

Storage Heaters: DANGER!

Heating systems have long been recognised as a potential source of pollution in the home. Electric storage heaters, however, were assumed to be clean and safe.

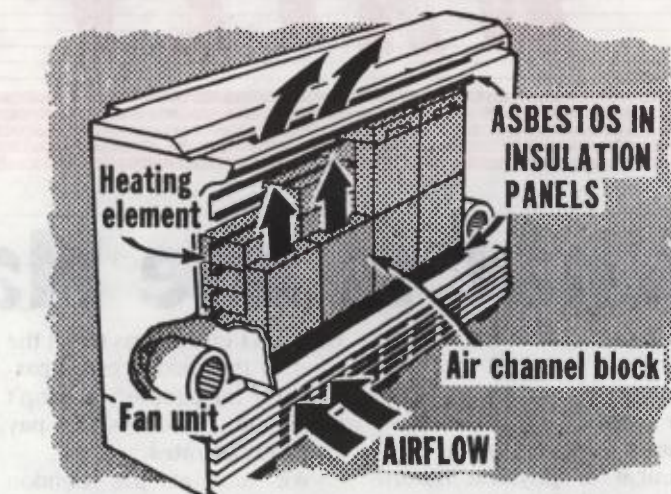
At least, that was what most people thought until 1 July when the *Sunday Times* broke the story that almost all of the 4.5 million heaters sold before 1975 are likely to contain asbestos insulation panels. The paper's report was prompted by the decision of Woodspring District Council at Weston-super-Mare, Avon, to remove all the Constor fan-assisted heaters in 140 homes 'urgently and solely on environmental grounds'.

Inevitably a lot of people phoned and wrote to Woodspring Council for more information. Equally inevitably a lot of people contacted the London Hazards Centre.

We have advised tenants and community groups in Lewisham, East Dulwich, Hammersmith, Greenwich, Tottenham and Reading, and office workers at Greenwich.

The Tenants' Association on the East Dulwich Estate conducted a model campaign, using a leaflet to raise awareness of the problem and a questionnaire survey of the estate which found that in nearly a third of the flats (19 out of 58) heaters had been removed, repaired or otherwise disturbed in ways likely to release high concentrations of asbestos fibres.

A report by the Hazards Centre, identifying brown asbestos (amosite) in a sample taken from one of the heaters,



Spotting the storage heater hazard

● Suspect any heaters installed before 1975

There are two main types of storage heater system:

- individual room heaters (convector or fan-assisted)
- centralised heat store units from which hot air is ducted around the home (when it works). People may not recognise these units as storage heaters. They are likely to contain large amounts of asbestos board exposed to the airstream.

● Check the name and serial number if you can find it. A list of asbestos-containing models should be available from your local electricity showroom, or the Electricity Council (30 Millbank SW1 tel: 01-834 2333). If you can't get a list, we will send one to tenants' and trade union groups.

helped strengthen the tenants' argument that all heaters should be removed.

Sympathetic environmental health and housing officers from Southwark Council were quick to concede the potential risk to health and the need for safe removal of the heaters. East Dulwich will now get the gas central heating for which tenants burdened by high electricity bills and cold flats have long campaigned.

It seems that many old stor-

age heaters must now be past their safe life (if they ever were safe). As insulation breaks down, the number of fibres released to the air of the home is likely to increase. Woodspring Council has told us that "the bonded asbestos insulation board has broken down in many of the units examined".

There is no safe level for asbestos pollution. Nor is there a type of fibre which doesn't cause cancer. It is a myth that white asbestos is "safe".

"Space suit" mix-up

WARNING! Lambeth Council, justifiably famed for having the best policies and methods for the removal of asbestos in its buildings, has unwittingly come unstuck over its use of these positive-pressure "space suits" for asbestos removal.

It seems that when the battery-powered air filter pump runs down or is not switched on, asbestos fibres could get into the clear plastic hoods. The combination of Martin-

dale positive-pressure respirators and pressure ventilated hoods did not have a certificate of approval under the Asbestos Regulations. Lambeth thought it did. Martindale knew it didn't, but thought the Council had got a special exemption from the Factory Inspectorate... Moral: ask to see the certificate of approval on any respirator issued for asbestos work, however good your employer.



VDU hazards

Many employers still think that you can drop a Visual Display Unit (VDU) on the desk in place of a typewriter and get rid of a few clerical workers in the process. The Hazards Centre has already had a large number of inquiries about problems workers are having (or trying to avoid) with the introduction of VDUs.

Workers who contact us regularly report how some colleagues were initially seduced by the "high tech" image of working with a VDU only to find the job was reduced to a boring, monotonous and repetitive task. In addition, large numbers of VDU operators report problems of muscle pain, eye strain, backache and headaches. There are also persistent reports of "clusters" of birth abnormalities among women who were pregnant while working on VDUs.

Since there is no single publication we can recommend, but a lot that is good on different aspects of the issue, the Centre is proposing to produce a simple Hazards Kit on VDUs containing the best of the available information. We also propose to produce a leaflet for use in the workplace that will set out briefly:

- who is affected by VDUs
- what the hazards are
- what can be done
- where to go for further information

An unusual job for fire-fighters

When it comes to pigeons, Londoners can be fairly emotional—they either love them or hate them. But whatever you think about the birds themselves, there can't be many people who enjoy the mess they make.

This was particularly the case for members of the Fire Brigades Union (FBU) in Heston. Their drill tower was covered in the stuff. When they complained to the management, they were told to clean

up the mess themselves — an unusual job for a fire-fighter.

So FBU safety rep Ian Griffiths contacted the London Hazards Centre to see whether they might be able to convince London Fire Brigade management that such a clean-up job would endanger their health and that it was a job for specialists.

Armed with information about the health risks of contact with pigeons or their excrement — which range



from respiratory disease similar to pneumonia through to meningitis — the FBU won the day. The management agreed to bring in GLC-approved contractors to do the dirty work.

Microwaves: invisible smog

Residents in Docklands are worried about living so close to the new British Telecom International microwave earth station, which transmits and receives microwave signals carrying TV programmes.

Newham Council is currently looking into the problem of "electronic smog" in this Docklands area. But a major problem is that little is known about the effects of long-term exposure to low-dose microwave radiations.

Mercury—BTI's rival in the telecommunications world—also has microwave transmitters in the Docklands area. These dishes are used to relay telephone conversations. So the residents are caught bet-



ween the two competitors.

These electronic installations are sited in a Special Development Area, in this case run by a quango called the London Docklands Development Corporation.

Pesticide problems

The Centre is involved in a working group planning an information pack and conference on the hazards of pesticides. We would like to hear from anyone who has had problems with these chemicals at work, at home or in the community.

Our interests include wood preservatives and wood-worm treatments, fungicides and mould treatments, insecticides and herbicides.

●The campaign by a group of residents at New Addington, against Croydon Council's use of growth-retardant herbicides on playing fields was featured in Thames TV's *Help!* programme about the London Hazards Centre on 15 October.

Electricity plus water...

Much has been written about the dangers and discomforts faced by people who live in tower blocks, and a significant proportion of the queries received by the London Hazards Centre are from tenants' groups who are trying to deal with the problems of tower-block life.

An alarming story came from Pauline House Tower Block in East London, where an "explosive" electrical fire on the 12th floor resulted in loss of supplies of water, electricity and the lifts. The London Hazards Centre was contacted by Spitalfields Housing

Rights Service who were concerned to find out if the "explosion" was a freak accident or due to damaged electrical wiring throughout the block.

The Centre suggested that Spitalfields Housing Rights should request a copy of the London Electricity report done after the "explosion". It turned out that throughout the tower block the waste water pipe ran immediately next to the electricity conduit and that the problem had been caused by water making contact with a damaged section of the conduit.

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Centre also put Spitalfields Housing Rights in touch with one of our network of contacts, Surveying Information for Tenants (SIFT), so that an independent inspection of the repair work could be done. Fortunately, in this case no one was injured and the problem at Pauline House Tower Block has been solved, at least for the moment. But how many other tower blocks in London have ageing service ducts where the water and electricity pipes run together? And how long will it be before a much more serious accident occurs?

Minorities Hazards Project

Getting to grips with hazards and policies for dealing with them can be difficult enough for most of us. It can be even more frustrating if English is not your first language. We believe that, in a multi-cultural society, people have a right to information in a variety of languages appropriate to their needs. We are interested in hearing from people who have experienced problems in this area, or who have ideas relevant to our Minorities Hazards Project Group.

Unequal wealth, unequal health

"The average age at death among the people of the West End is fifty-five years; the average age at death among the people of the East End is thirty years." These figures relate to Londoners at the turn of the century, and can be found in Jack London's book "The People of the Abyss", published in 1903.

Of course, the average life expectancy of East End Londoners is now more than 30 years. The latest figures show that females living in England and Wales can expect to live for 77 years, and males for 71.

Without doubt, the lifespan of people living in both the east and the west ends of London has been increased by better understanding of how infectious diseases spread and of methods to control them — such as improved sanitation, mass vaccination programmes and antibiotics.

But class differences in ill-health and death rate still remain, as can be seen from the diagram. Also, as is well known, people in professional and managerial social classes (I & II) receive more and better health care than people in social classes III, IV & V.

In the 1980s, more people in social classes IV & V can expect to die from "older" diseases such as tuberculosis, bronchitis and pneumonia than can people in the professional and managerial classes. But, these days, a major toll in

human life is cancer, heart disease, arthritis and diabetes.

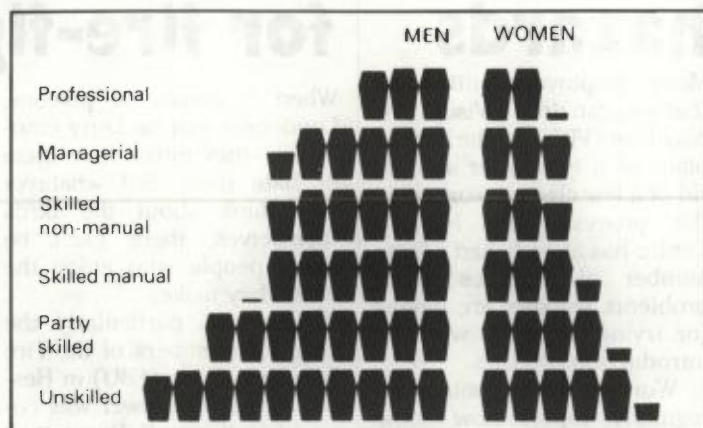
While these diseases are called "degenerative", there is no evidence that they are an inevitable part of the ageing process. There is much evidence, however, to link them with the environment. As has been stated by a member of the US National Cancer Advisory Board: "Cancer is largely a preventable disease".

Maps of cancer distribution in the UK show very clearly how much more common cancer is in the city compared with the country. This isn't simply because there are more people per square mile in the cities, but because a higher proportion of the urban population dies from cancer.

In addition, there are marked differences in death rates from cancer of all sorts among the different social classes: people in social classes IV & V are — at any age — much more likely to die from cancer than their counterparts in classes I & II.

People in the city are exposed more to agents or factors that are implicated in causing cancer. In London, for instance, asbestos fibres are released every time drivers use their brakes or clutch, and asbestos dust still pollutes the London Underground.

The properties of many chemical and physical agents that cause harm to life are now much better understood — "pollution" has become an



Death rates by sex and social occupational class (15-64 years, England & Wales 1971). Each coffin represents a person per 1000 population. Married women are classified by their husband's occupation.

everyday word. But it's not company directors who have to experience the daily pollution of noise, fumes or dust in the workplace. It's not their children who suffer the effects of dangerous materials being brought home from work, who live close to factories that add more contamination to the already polluted urban environment, who live in damp housing, and whose parents cannot afford an adequate diet.

Some people argue that a person's health is their own responsibility, that individuals have control over what happens to their bodies irrespective of prevailing social and economic pressures.

Hazards to human health can be controlled. It is organised rather than individual

action that is needed to bring this about.

● TB is a disease which thrives on poverty. The bacterium favours damp, dark and dirty places and seizes most readily on the already damaged lung.

TB is on the increase and will continue to increase as long as Britain continues its return to Victorian values. Last year two London home helps contracted the disease after cleaning up a filthy flat. The home care service in the borough concerned is worried about the rising rate of TB among the elderly.

More than 6,000 people got the disease between mid-1981 and mid-1982, and 455 died.

Are you affiliated to the London Hazards Centre?

To the London Hazards Centre, at the Polytechnic of the South Bank, 103 Borough Road, London SE1 0AA.
Tel: 01-261 9558

Please list me/us as supporter of the London Hazards Centre ☐ (please tick)

Name

Organisation (if relevant)

Telephone (work) (home)

I/We enclose £5 affiliation fee ☐ £

I/We also enclose a donation of £

Total £

I/We would like to make a regular donation. Please send Standing Order Form ☐ (please tick)

Please make cheques/postal orders payable to the "London Hazards Centre"

We are here to provide a free information service on workplace and community hazards. We also provide advice and help on what you can do about them and what is being done by other people in similar situations.

Our work is GLC-funded for 1984/5. Obviously our finances beyond next March are very uncertain. We are relying on trade union, tenants' and community organisations, and individuals who are concerned about hazards to help us carry on the work we have begun.

Affiliation to the Centre is open to INDIVIDUALS and ORGANISATIONS. It costs £5 a year. For this we'll keep you informed through our newsletter.

If you have already affiliated, and persuaded the organisations you are involved with to affiliate, thank you. If you haven't, please affiliate now, and make a donation if you can. If you can't for any reason, we'd like to hear from you anyway just to know you support our work. So, please fill out the form opposite.