

THE DAILY HAZARD

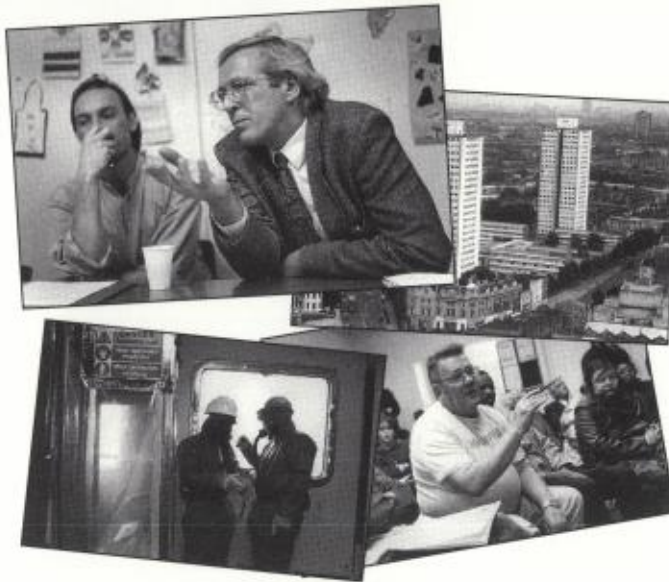
Westminster tenants reject asbestos assurances

Former tenants of Westminster's Elgin Estate took issue with the country's most eminent asbestos epidemiologist at a public meeting on 4 February, in a debate of vital importance for all tenants living in asbestos-ridden buildings.

All eyes were on Professor Julian Peto of the Institute of Cancer Research, commissioned by Westminster Council and Waltham & Elgin Community Homes (WECH) to report on the health effects of asbestos exposure among the estimated 3,000 people who lived at Chantry Point and Hermes Point tower blocks between 1968 and 1991 when tenants were finally decanted. The blocks were demolished in 1994.

The health scandal was revealed by the January 1996 Barratt report which accused Westminster Council of failing to manage the asbestos in the buildings and of moving homeless families into the blocks of flats in the knowledge that they were riddled with asbestos. Brown asbestos was sprayed on to steel beams housed in panels of asbestos chipboard; internal walls were made from asbestos-faced chipboard; asbestos cement was used to cover heaters, floor tiles contained asbestos and service ducts were enclosed by asbestos panels. Large voids between flats allowed circulation of asbestos fibres from the steel beams around the block and into flats. At the meeting organised by the Association of Former Residents of Chantry and Hermes Points (ARCH), Prof. Peto presented his report to the former tenants. Peto claims that the odds are 20 to 1 against even a single one of the 3,000 tenants getting cancer. He sees no point in monitoring their future health.

Although he claims to have "erred on the side of caution in



Julian Peto discusses his report with former tenants of the blocks which once towered over the Harrow Road and from which asbestos had to be stripped before demolition.

several aspects of the risk calculation", he also admits that "there are, of course, many uncertainties in such predictions". He goes on to say that "the central assumption that the risk will be 10,000 times less when the exposure is 10,000 times less, although scientifically reasonable, is impossible to test".

LHC worker Mick Holder argued that Peto didn't have enough data to draw these conclusions. The HSE took a single set of 33 samples in March 1985. Peto himself admits that they are unsystematic. They give no clue to higher levels that might be caused by cleaning, decorating, high winds or different heating levels. It was left to a postgraduate environmental health student to investigate asbestos levels caused by DIY work such as drilling, sawing and sanding. Peto uses studies of other buildings to draw conclusions from this slight evidence. He talks in terms of averages and has no way of assessing whether

some tenants may have had higher exposures than the average.

Although the risk increases with the level of exposure, people exposed to small amounts have developed asbestos cancers. Bromley Council tenant Jean Walker died in 1994 of mesothelioma caused by redecorating the asbestos cement internal walls of her house: Bromley council recently paid £70,000 in an out of court settlement.

Prof. Peto's previous work led the HSE to underestimate the risk of asbestos exposure to construction workers. In 1996 he finally admitted that very many more construction workers were to die than he had previously predicted. The government's safety police, the Health & Safety Executive (HSE), then mounted a massive campaign alerting construction workers to the problem in an attempt to prevent future exposure to the deadly dust.

After hearing the debate and the

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Centre's criticisms of the report, the tenants couldn't endorse Professor Peto's conclusions. "Professor Peto's report seems reassuring but is flawed," Will Rolt, Chair of ARCH, told Daily Hazard. "I am concerned that he could come to such definite conclusions from what he himself admits is insufficient information. Myself and other former tenants are therefore left with the stress and concern caused by our exposure to asbestos. We shall continue to pursue claims for adequate compensation from the Council. Somebody must make sure that the health of former tenants is properly monitored, for the sake of future generations."

Ex-tenants have been advised to make sure that a record of their exposure is kept by their GPs. WECH has set up a database of ex-tenants and will keep a record of any asbestos-related diseases that develop. Although a proportion of them would be expected to contract mesothelioma and lung cancer independently of their exposure to asbestos at home, it should be possible to identify whether that exposure increased the risk of contracting these diseases.

This controversy is of local, national and international significance. Local newspapers reported Peto's conclusions with headlines like "Asbestos is 'low risk': official" which can only breed complacency amongst both tenants and local authorities. Meanwhile, Peto's reputation is such that the international asbestos industry will use this report to defend the use of its products, to the detriment of tenants and people working with asbestos everywhere.

Asbestos Hazards Handbook, London Hazards Centre, £5 (£12 to commercial organisations) + £1 postage

Solvent paints banned

Islington painters show solvents won't wash

Trade unions at Islington Council building department scored an important success in January when the council agreed to replace hazardous solvent based paints with safer water based ones.

The solvent in 'oil-based' paints is what makes the paint a liquid: once on the wall, it evaporates into the air you breathe. The vapour attacks the central nervous system, which is why painting can give you a headache. The lasting effects can include asthma, dermatitis and birth defects or miscarriages. In the long term it can cause permanent brain damage and pre-senile dementia; 'Painter's dementia' is a recognised industrial disease in Denmark. When used in housing and schools solvent-based paints are a particular hazard to children and the elderly, and can cause or intensify allergies and asthma. They are a fire hazard: in 1993 a YTS trainee burned to death when he was overcome by paint vapour which then caught fire.

More solvents also have to be used to clean the paint from equipment and skin: they then have to be disposed of safely.

Since 1990 UCATT and other unions, and tenants

organisations, have negotiated bans in Manchester, Sheffield, Southwark and elsewhere. Paint makers are talking about moving entirely to water based by the year 2000, spurred on by European Union moves towards a ban.

Islington Council agreed to test various brands of solvent-free paint after Peter Farrell, UCATT Safety Representative and the joint shop stewards committee presented the case. It has taken two years of trials and safety committee debates to get the decision through. Peter, a painter and decorator, previously worked for Camden Council, where he persuaded a council safety officer to prohibit the use of solvent-based eggshell paints at a nursery.

As well as the health advantages, Islington found that water based paints dry more quickly, so jobs can be done in a single visit with less disruption. Joinery can be painted before it leaves the joinery shop, something previously impossible due to the vapour hazard and the lack of drying space: the finish is much better than for items painted on site.

The paint chosen is about 15 per cent more expensive than solvent-based, a reasonable



Islington painter tries out water-based paint Islington Council

price in the Council's view, but there should be savings on equipment costs (they're easier on brushes), undercoats, cleaning solvents and work time. It dries poorly in cold damp conditions, so external painting needs to be done between April and September. It won't be used on radiators etc. until the manufacturers come up with something better — as they certainly will. Surface preparation is important and application is slightly different, so some training may be needed. All these costs are seen as reasonable when set against the benefits to health, convenience and quality.

Sadly, self management of schools and local management of estates may mean that

thousands of schoolchildren and tenants won't benefit from Islington UCATT's work. But the argument that water-based paints are impractical or expensive won't wash any longer: tenants, parents and building workers should be pushing for them from now on.

Resources

A chart of waterbased products is free from the Paintmakers Association, James House, Bridge St, Leatherhead, Surrey KT22 7EP. Tel: 01372 360660.

LHC published a 2-part factsheet on Paints in *Daily Hazard* no 31-32 — ring 0171-267-3387 for a copy or send SAE.

Government proposes to sabotage working time directive

The consultation period on the transposition into UK law of the European Community Working Time Directive ended on 6 March. The government may try and slip regulations through this Parliament but it will have to do this by 9 April. This is the latest that Parliament can be prorogued before a General Election.

The Government's continuing hostility to the Directive as a health and safety measure is maintained in the implementation proposals. It clearly states its intention to "minimise disruption and avoid undue burdens" on business and ignores the benefits of protecting working people's health.

If the current government is defeated in the General Election, the incoming

government may be more sympathetic to those in favour of the Directive. However, it has to be said that in all the arguments of the last few months, the case linking excessive working time, shiftwork and nightwork to adverse health effects has rather gone by default. As part of the campaign over the particular piece of legislation, the health and safety argument on working time must be put forcibly so as to challenge the Government's contention that it is purely an employment conditions issue.

Long working hours commonly result in physical and psychological fatigue and stress leading to increased risk of disease and accidents. Night and shift workers are especially at risk because of the disturbance to the body's natural

rhythms caused by such work patterns.

The Government has found a way to disable the Directive as a health and safety measure by means of its proposals on enforcement. With one exception, the enforcement route would be by workers taking a case to an Industrial Tribunal. The Health and Safety Executive and local authorities would have no role in determining compliance by employers.

The one exception is nightwork. In this case the Government proposes to give the health and safety authorities the power to require employers to produce relevant documentation. However, it would be at the discretion of the authorities whether to request the information nor is there anything

they can do with it once received. Employers would not have to make automatic returns.

In non-union workplaces, the DTI proposes the election of employee representatives with the power to make agreements with employers about working hours. This is a step forward from the Health and Safety (Consultation with Employees) Regulations which only provide for consultation.

Resources

LHC handbook *Hard Labour: stress, ill-health and hazardous employment practices*, £6.95 + £1 postage *Hazards* magazine: front page article in issue 57, just out; factsheet "Overwork: fatigue, long hours and pressure of work", no 49, 1995 (£2.50 each from PO Box 199, Sheffield S1 1FQ)

Display screen equipment regulations

The Health and Safety (Display Screen Equipment) (DSE) Regulations govern the safe use of computers used for work. They came fully into force on 31 December 1996 and apply to all employers. While far from perfect, they offer some protection to computer workers. This factsheet offers guidance to safety representatives on how to get the best out of them.

The Regulations cover computer and other equipment used for the display of text or graphics. Laptops and hand-held display equipment are covered if in frequent and regular use. Screens which show television or film pictures are excluded, as are calculators, cash registers and most scientific and medical devices.

USERS

Regulation 1 plus guidance defines DSE "users", employees who habitually use display screen equipment as a significant part of their normal work. The other Regulations apply to users who work:

- at their employer's workstation
- at home
- at another employer's workstation

Regulation 1 also defines an "operator", a self-employed computer worker, to whom the Regulations partly apply.

A user must fulfil most or all of the following criteria:

- be dependent on a computer to do the job
- have no discretion on the use of a computer
- need significant training and skills
- use a computer for an hour or more at a time
- use a computer more or less daily
- need rapid input and output of information
- have high levels of attention and concentration

Most computer workers meet these criteria. In any case, other legislation imposes the same level of obligation on employers towards non-users as the DSE Regulations towards users, with the possible exception of the eye test and glasses provision (see later). Safety representatives should argue that the same standards

should apply to all the computer workers they represent, these being not less than the minimum prescribed by the DSE Regulations.

RISK ASSESSMENT

Regulation 2 sets out the duty on employers to carry out risk assessments of the workstations of users and operators, including homeworkers, in order to identify risks and reduce them "to the lowest extent reasonably practicable." Assessments should be repeated when they are no longer valid or when circumstances change significantly. They should be systematic, appropriate to the risk and comprehensive. They are often carried out by means of checklists completed either by users or assessors; both categories should receive suitable training. Assessors should be familiar with the main requirements of the Regulations and have the ability to:

- assess risks
- draw upon additional information
- draw valid and reliable conclusions
- make and communicate clear records of assessments
- recognise their own limitations and call on extra expertise.

The opinions of workers should always be consulted and they should be provided with the results. Union representatives should be involved in the design of assessment, should advise their members on the suitability of the method to be employed and should obtain the results. They should press for all workstations to be assessed, this being required under some legislation. They should monitor recommendations for improvements and ensure they are carried out.

EQUIPMENT

Regulation 3 and a Schedule set the standards for equipment, dealing with:

- adequate lighting, including adequate

contrast with no glare or reflections

- noise minimisation
- comfortable temperature and humidity
- reduction of radiation to negligible levels
- software which is appropriate to the task and user, provided feedback on system status with no secret monitoring
- window coverings
- adjustable, readable, glare/reflection free screen with no flicker
- usable, adjustable, detachable, legible keyboard — there should be adequate space in front of the keyboard to support hands and wrists
- glare-free work surface with adequate space for all necessary arrangements
- adequate leg room and clearance under desk
- chair with adjustable height and back support

In the recommended set-up, workers should have good support for their feet and backs, look at the screen near horizontally, and address the keyboard with their forearms horizontal with minimum flexion of the wrists.

Workers are entitled to a footrest if they want one. When a case can be made for document holders, supplementary personal lighting and anti-glare screens, these should be provided. The legislation makes no mention of mouses, trackballs and similar devices.

Safety representatives should press for these minimum standards to be applied to all equipment whoever uses it; some piece of legislation will require this.

BREAKS

Regulation 4 requires employers to plan breaks or changes of activity into the work routine, these being part of working time. These can be taken at the keyboard, or preferably by performing other tasks away from the keyboard or by stopping work. Short, frequent breaks are better than longer, occasional ones. Continuous keyboarding should not take place for more than 2 hours and preferably for no more than 1 hour, with

a break of 5-10 minutes or more. The timing of breaks should be at the discretion of the worker rather than the computer. Safety representatives should seek negotiations or consultations on the planning of work routines to enable breaks to be taken; this should include training and information.

EYES

Regulation 5 gives users a right to free eye and eyesight tests upon starting computer work and at regular intervals thereafter. Employers have arranged a variety of ways of meeting this requirement:

- by allowing the user to go to his/her own optician who bills the employer
- by providing the employee with a voucher for a certain amount
- by directing the employee to an optician of the employer's choice.

The first method is preferable. Many employers have introduced vision screening tests carried out on their premises. This is not a proper eye and eyesight test nor an acceptable alternative to one. Workers and their representatives should insist on the full test by a suitably qualified person.

The optician, not the employer, should say how often a repeat test is needed.

Where tests show that spectacles are required for computer work, the employer must pay for these. The employer's obligation extends only to the provision of the basic lenses and frames.

TRAINING

Regulations 6 and 7 oblige employers to provide education and training in the health and safety aspects of computer work. These activities should take place in working time and should cover:

- health effects of computer work
- exercises for relieving eye and muscle stress
- optimum set-up of the workstation
- good posture and keyboard technique
- work routines and breaks

- special characteristics of software
- legislative requirements and workers' rights

Workers should have the opportunity to attend a discussion on these topics with a lead speaker, in addition to any leaflets or videos that might be used, to enable them to ask questions and raise their own concerns.

RELATED LEGISLATION

The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations set up a general requirement to carry out risk assessments which will cover all workers not subjected to the DSE Regulations. They require employers to appoint competent persons to carry out day to day safety functions. They give representatives of recognised unions consultative rights on the safety needs of the members they represent, the appointment of competent persons, on the provision of training and on the introduction of new technology. The Provision and Use of Work Equipment Regulations (see Daily Hazard 49) deal with the safe use of equipment and apply to all computer equipment not otherwise covered. The Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations (see Daily Hazards 46 and 47) deal with physical arrangements at work including temperature, ventilation, space and heating.

RESOURCES

VDUs: an easy guide to the Regulations. Health and Safety Executive, ISBN 0 7176 0735 6, £5.00

VDU Work and the Hazards to Health. London Hazards Centre, ISBN 0 948974 11 7, £6.50 + £1 postage

Display Screen Equipment Work: guidance on Regulations. HSE Books, ISBN 0 7176 0410, £5.00: this gives the Regulations and guidance

RSI Hazards Handbook. LHC, 1997. An up to date worker's guide to RSI prevention. £12 (£4.50 to union branches & local groups when ordered from LHC) + £1 postage.

In Parliament

RIDDOR figures faked

Labour Party health and safety spokesperson Graham Allen has questioned the validity of statistics collected under the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations (RIDDOR). An early day motion by Allen and 3 other MPs alleges that Sheerness company Co-Steel pressurised workers to take holidays when injured at work, or come back on light duties before they were fully fit, so that Co-Steel could avoid reporting the incident.

Co-Steel won a British Safety Council award on the basis of the cooked figures, which was later withdrawn. Allen has spoken to Co-Steel employees and has over 30 written statements supporting the allegations.

Early Day Motions don't get debated but enable MPs to publicise or support a concern — rather like a petition. The other originators of this EDM are Harry Barnes, Kevin McNamara and John Austin-Walker.

● Please ask your MP to sign EDM no 469 on Non-Reporting of Industrial Accidents at Co-Steel.

Dignity at Work Bill

Bullying is a widespread work hazard and is being increasingly recognised. The Dignity at Work Bill is a proposal supported by the Campaign Against Bullying At Work (CABAW). Proposed by Labour Lord Monkswell, it would create a right to be treated with dignity at work, enable an employee to complain to an industrial tribunal without having to quit the job, and award compensation for bullying on the same scale as racial or sexual harassment. At the moment the only recourse through a tribunal is a complaint of constructive dismissal.

The bill is completing its passage through the House of Lords and CABAW is seeking supporters to sign an open letter for publication in the press.

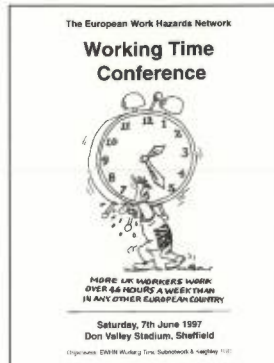
● To support CABAW and the Bill, contact Chris Ball at MSF, 33 Moreland Street, London EC1V 8BB (0171-505-3000).

Working Time Conference

The European Work Hazards Network (EWHN) is an international network of health and safety resource centres, union representatives and campaigns. In 1997 it will run three conferences on working time as a European health and safety issue, in Sheffield, Madrid and Berlin.

The first conference is in Sheffield in June and will aim to bring together 200 trade unionists, campaigners and experts. Issues from the conference will go forward to the Madrid and Berlin conference to help form a common platform for the EWHN.

The conference fee is £20. Contact Mick Williams at Keighley TUC, 20 Low Street, Keighley BD21 3PN (01142-422608).



PUBLICATIONS

- ▲ **RSI Hazards Handbook.** January 1997. £12/£4.50*
- ▲ **The Asbestos Hazards Handbook.** December 1995. £12/£5*
- ▲ **Hard Labour: Stress, ill-health and hazardous employment practices.** August 1994. £6.95.
- ▲ **VDU Work and the Hazards to Health.** August 1993. £6.50
- ▲ **Protecting the Community: A worker's guide to health and safety in Europe.** May 1992. Now only £2.00
- ▲ **Sick Building Syndrome: Causes, effects and control.** June 1990. £4.50
- ▲ **Fluorescent Lighting: A health hazard overhead.** March 1987. £2.00*/£5.00
- ▲ **Toxic Treatments: Wood preservative hazards at work and in the home.** January 1989. £5.95

* Price to community/tenants/union groups when ordered direct from the Centre.

Add £0.50 post and packing up to each £5.00 worth of books. Discounts for 10 or more copies. Cheques to 'London Hazards Centre'.

For a list of factsheets contact the Centre or send SAE.

HAZLIT is London Hazards Centre's library database, available on the World Wide Web at <http://www.poptel.org.uk/infosource/hazlit/hazsearch.htm>

Health & Safety Training

Our trainers draw on experience of advising safety reps and voluntary organisations to provide practical training which you can apply in the workplace.

Introduction to Health and Safety May, June, September
Management, risk assessment, legal duties, information, training, welfare, safety representatives and safety committees, hazards identification.

Asbestos in the Workplace and Community Tuesday 17 June
In thousands of buildings asbestos must be systematically managed or removed.

Stress Tuesday 1 July
Work can and should be designed to minimise harmful stress.

Cost: £40; £20 to organisations qualifying for the LBGU training bursaries.

We can also design and run training at the Centre or your own site. Call us to discuss your needs.

Please ...

... Send us your press cuttings ...

You can help by sending us any press cuttings of local campaigns, accidents, inquests, prosecutions, or any other health and safety information from your local newspapers, trade magazines, etc. If you think you can regularly check a particular publication, let us know — phone and speak to Tim or Chris.

... and tell us your news

Negotiated a good agreement? Discovered a new angle on a hazard? Tell us about it. It'll help other people we work with and it might even provoke a Daily Hazard article!

Health Projects cut in Camden, funded in Newham

Camden and Islington Health Authority has now cut all funding for the local Occupational Health Project, which will thus be closing in March. This shortsighted decision destroys a useful and cost-effective resource and wastes years of hard and committed work.

Better news from Newham, where the Council will be providing Regeneration Fund money for a local Occupational Project from April 1998. This follows pilot work by East London and City Occupational Health Project's lone worker Christine Reeves.



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