

“THE ASBESTOS SNOWSTORM” – impact of airborne asbestos particles in GE Peterborough Building 16 and adjoining buildings

INTRODUCTION

Over the last ten years the Occupational & Environmental Health Coalition – Peterborough (O&EHC-P) has worked in a number of ways to support the right for fair compensation for workers with occupational disease, their families and for the community right to know of potential toxins in the environment from industrial workplaces in the Peterborough area.

To this end, the O&EHC-P steering committee circulated a document entitled DOCUMENT re GE SHUTDOWNS: SHUTDOWN JOBS: “The Dirtiest Jobs!” (See attached) in July 2013.

This document, “THE ASBESTOS SNOWSTORM”, is the second in the series aimed to enhance the understanding of exposures in the GE Peterborough workplace environment. It is descriptive in nature and documents the stories from the experience and knowledge of workers themselves. The process described below refers only to an historical practice. It is not the current practice.

ISSUE OF CONCERN

“THE SNOWSTORM” - impact of repeated exposure to tiny particles of asbestos caused by multiple dust storms of asbestos particles circulating in the air of Building 16 and adjoining buildings.

THE PROCESS

The discussion with John Ball, James Dufresne and Don McConnell on the impact of airborne asbestos particles in Building 16 and other buildings took place at several meetings between March and June 2014. It is likely other buildings were impacted as well due to the open concept commonly referred to as the “Main Aisle”. The statements were recorded by Heather

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Brooks-Hill and then edited and clarified for accuracy by Mr. Ball, Mr. Dufresne and Mr. McConnell.

DESCRIPTION OF ISSUE OF CONCERN

GE built and tested several different types of switchgear circuit breakers. In Building 16 air-blast switchgear breakers were built and tested. When they were activated, the workers experienced the likes of a dynamite explosion. The resulting shock waves from this testing shook the whole building, including the asbestos-lagged steam pipes overhead.

WORKERS IN THIS AREA WERE REPEATEDLY EXPOSED TO A DUST STORM OF ASBESTOS PARTICLES DUE TO THE SHAKING OF THE ASBESTOS- LAGGED STEAM PIPES: “AN ASBESTOS SNOWSTORM”.

DISCUSSION

During high production periods, these switchgears would be activated as many as 90 times per day during the late 1950s – late 1970s, and probably into the late 1990’s. The resulting “SNOWSTORM” happened day after day for many years. The shock was loud and fierce – 95 decibels plus.

The risk of asbestos exposure is even better understood today:
<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/no-safe-use-as-the-top-workplace-killer-asbestos-leaves-a-deadly-legacy/article19151351/>

As well, the risk of small asbestos particles - 5 micron – that can linger in the air for many weeks must be recognized:

“...The dangers of asbestos were not debated by any scientific group. Invisible fibres of this fireproof material can break off and remain suspended in the air for weeks.... Once inhaled some of this material stays in the body and can induce lethal lung disease, sometimes decades later...”

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(The Secret History of the War on Cancer by Devra Davis: p. 459 paperback edition, Basic Books NYC NY USA 2009. ISBN 978-0-465-01568-9)

The doors between the buildings were frequently opened and left open and, therefore, the strong air currents carried the asbestos particles to the other buildings.

GE claims there was no asbestos exposure in Building 16 because asbestos was not used in the product process. However, besides the asbestos snowstorms, the workers say asbestos was also used in large quantities in the tooling. Textolite was present in the tooling and asbestos in the gloves and blankets used for workers' protection in the tooling.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, workers in Building 16 were continually exposed during the late 1950s – late 1970s, and probably into the late 1990's to the asbestos "SNOWSTORM" in the testing of the switchgear breakers. This was due to the intense jarring of the asbestos-lagged pipes overhead and in the tooling. In addition, workers in other buildings would also have been exposed to asbestos particles that travelled and lingered because of the "Main Aisle" open-plan workplace.

RECOMMENDATION

Workers filing for compensation need to include the time spent in Building 16 and adjacent buildings as part of their "asbestos exposure". This fact cannot be ignored in the asbestos threshold measurement used in determining eligibility for compensation.

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