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Post-Dispatch: NY officials underestimate danger

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NY officials underestimate danger

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Federal and state officials in New York have grossly underestimated or played down the number of people in lower Manhattan who are at risk of being sickened or killed from exposure to asbestos released in the collapse of the World Trade Center.

Evaluations of analyses done by teams of leading asbestos researchers show the increased risk of death to people who live, work or study in homes or offices that have not been properly decontaminated could be as high as one additional cancer death for every 10 people exposed.

These figures come as federal and state officials continue to insist that there is no significant health risk to those living and working near ground zero from the dust of hundreds of thousands of tons of asbestos-containing products used in the floors, walls, ceilings and on the steel of the twin towers.

"The agencies have made it a priority to get the lower Manhattan financial and stock markets up and running at any cost. In so doing, they have allowed thousands of people to be exposed to substances that haven't even all been identified, let alone quantified," said Joel Shufro, Executive Director of the New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health, which represents more than 250 unions.

Federal and state officials are not disputing that the dust is making thousands of New Yorkers ill. For months people have been plagued with effects such as severe sinus infections, asthma attacks, nausea, headaches, rashes, beet-red eyes, and coughing that can bring a person to his knees. This is caused by the pulverized concrete, fiberglass, metal and other debris in the toxic dust storm and smoke that inundated the city after the towers crumbled Sept. 11.

These symptoms are not indications of asbestos exposure. It takes 18 to 30 years for asbestos to exert its deadly effects. This latency period -- the time from when a fiber is inhaled in lung tissue to when a person knows they are ill or dying -- makes it easy to ignore or overlook the hazards of asbestos.

"Those (asbestos) exposures may have grave adverse public health consequences, but we will not know exactly what those consequences are for decades," Shufro said.

HILL RUSHES IN WITH NEW AND OLD TECHNOLOGY

When the World Trade Center went down, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration rushed teams to the site. Over the months, they gathered thousands of samples but used 20-year-old methods for collecting and counting asbestos fibers to assess the health risks from dust that blanketed lower Manhattan. The agencies and their state counterparts said only low levels of asbestos were found outside.

"The public faces little or no danger from asbestos," numerous agency heads echoed.

Civilian scientists and physicians hired by unions, tenant groups, contractors and New York

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political leaders found just the opposite. Taking hundreds of samples, many inside apartments, offices and condos, these experts used the newest electron microscope technology and fiber counting protocols. They found far more asbestos fibers than did government investigators. These private experts -- all regularly used by the government as consultants -- found levels in the dwellings that alarmed many assessing the health risk New Yorkers face.

"These eminent asbestos researchers brought state-of-the-art methods to lower Manhattan and the significance of what they found with the new technology is dramatically different than what EPA and New York State reported," said Cate Jenkins, a senior EPA chemist in the agency's hazardous waste division.

"For every asbestos fiber EPA detected, the new methods used by the outside experts found nine," Jenkins said. "This is too important a difference to be ignored if you really care about the health of the public."

Jenkins, a 22-year veteran of the EPA, talked about the asbestos levels that researchers Eric Chatfield and John Kominsky found in apartments and condos near the collapse that had not been cleaned or cleaned improperly.

"If people continue living and working in places that still have dust in the carpets, furniture, drapes and heating and cooling system, these fibers will continue to be resuspended," Jenkins explained. "The elevated risk could be from around one-in-a-thousand extra cancers to maybe as high as one in 10."

Four other federal health experts -- two toxicologists, an epidemiologist and physician -- from the EPA and the Centers for Disease Control, have studied the data gathered by Chatfield, Kominsky and a team headed by Hugh Granger of HP Environmental in Virginia. They agreed with Jenkins' interpretation of the data.

Officials at EPA headquarters declined repeated requests to comment on these statements.

No one really knows how many, if any, people might be killed by the asbestos. But a study released three weeks ago by EPA investigators on the health risks to vermiculite miners and their families in Libby, Mont., bodes ominously for what New Yorkers may face.

"The concentrations of asbestos in both settled dusts inside homes in Libby is comparable to the settled dusts inside the buildings in lower Manhattan," Jenkins said.

She and others in the agency are questioning why, if Libby is dangerous enough to be declared a Superfund site, is the EPA shrugging off even higher levels in New York.

"It is unfathomable to believe that EPA can stand behind antiquated science when the report on Libby, issued by the same agency, irrefutably documents the validity of the new methods," Jenkins said.

Many federal employees, contract scientists and physicians believe the confusion over how federal agencies are handling asbestos from the collapse is exacerbated by the government's long-fought internal disputes over what kind of asbestos is dangerous and how many fibers of what size it takes to sicken or kill.

LOWER MANHATTAN RESIDENTS FEEL ABANDONED

Nothing can be done about the enormous amount of asbestos and other toxic substances in the

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choking dust that terrified survivors and rescue workers gulped down as they fled from the collapsing towers.

The dust storm that crashed through Manhattan like a sonic boom on Sept. 11 blew in windows and doors many blocks from ground zero. Air conditioning units on rooftops and in windows sucked pounds of dust into apartments and building ventilation systems.

Some apartments had inches of gray dust covering everything. Most others within blocks of the attack had floors, walls, window coverings and furniture covered in a talclike film.

Those continuing the recovery effort at ground zero have hundreds of environmental and occupational health specialists hovering nearby, trying to keep the workers in the pit safe and diminish future exposure to asbestos and other dangerous material.

But many of the 340,000 or so people who live in the lower part of that island feel they were abandoned and, at the least, fed conflicting information by federal, state and city officials on how to avoid asbestos exposure.

"It's like all of us who live down here really don't matter to anyone in any government. We've pretty much been left to fend for ourselves," said Steve Swancy, who, with his wife, lived in a Battery Park apartment.

The World Trade Center, two blocks away, which once filled his view, has been reduced to a huge hole in the ground. It spews an acrid dusty stench, nothing like the time-honored bouquet of roasting chestnuts which used to permeate lower Manhattan through the fall and winter.

The Swancys' patio doors were open when the buildings collapsed. Their one-bedroom apartment, like many of the 238 others in their 15-story building, was covered in dust.

Those with insurance paid as much as \$10,000 to have professional asbestos crews clean their apartments, Swancy said.

The landlord cleaned the rest.

"But there was still dust all over the place, and we couldn't get anyone to tell us how much asbestos was still there," he said.

The tenants paid to have the dust analyzed, and the dust contained levels of asbestos above 1 percent, which the EPA considers unsafe.

The landlord sent in another cleaning crew.

On the streets nine floors below Swancy's balcony, men in air tanks and moon suits slowly waddle behind and beside huge gushing mobile water tanks and purring SuperVac vacuum trucks.

The bizarre ballet was precisely orchestrated to wash out, suck up and capture the most minute pocket of dust from Battery Park's promenade, playgrounds, sidewalks, and even children's sand boxes in the park.

Swancy, a 58-year-old computer consultant, has a sick wife. Her ribs are sore from hours of gagging, coughing and choking from the same dust that EPA crews are so carefully removing on the street out front.

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He wonders why the crews working on the street are so meticulous, using special micro-filter vacuums, wearing special protective clothing and respirators. But in his apartment, the three-person pickup band of day laborers the landlord hired used brooms, dustpans, old mops and buckets and everyday vacuum cleaners.

"They didn't even have masks," he said. "My wife had to find masks for them."

He wondered what government officials knew about the dust that they weren't sharing.

"To those of us in the middle of this, it's obvious that there is a conscious effort not to put out the facts," said Swaney, who heads his building's tenant association. "I don't know whether it's the White House, or the governor's mansion or the mayor's office, but someone doesn't want this truth about asbestos getting out."

"They don't want to close down lower Manhattan. We're talking about a lot of money, a lot of jobs. That's OK, but is it safe to live here?"

Swaney and his wife moved out of lower Manhattan.

"Christie Whitman says it fine to return to our homes," he noted. "She's the EPA boss. Should we not believe her when she says our apartments are safe? But how does she know?"

That's a question that many are starting to ask.

EPA SAYS IT CAN'T TEST APARTMENTS AND OFFICES

None of the thousands of tests that the EPA cites as showing the asbestos risk is minimal were taken inside the buildings and rooms where people live, study and work.

"That's just not our job, and we have no policies or procedures for doing that type of testing," said Honnie Bellow, spokeswoman for the EPA's region II office in New York. "We've never had to worry about asbestos in houses before."

Many people within the government said that when the buildings collapsed, the agencies grabbed the only "how to handle asbestos" book they had off the shelves. But those regulations haven't been updated for years, regardless of the need repeatedly demonstrated by field investigators for a half-dozen different agencies.

"To ignore testing the indoor environment for asbestos defies logic," said Granger, the Virginia toxicologist. "Outside, the normal air movement dilutes and dissipates asbestos concentration. Inside, the fibers are trapped by four walls. They constantly get resuspended just by occupants walking on carpets, closing the drapes or having the air conditioner or heat go on or off."

BAD INFORMATION FROM THE START

Politicians, administrators of state and federal agencies and their spokespeople gave conflicting information and suggestions, sometimes in the same statement or news conference. Newspaper, radio, television and Web sites were filled with questionable guidance.

In October, the EPA and OSHA were still putting out information to residents saying that if dust from the collapsed towers was in homes or offices "people should be sure to clean thoroughly and avoid inhaling dust while doing so."

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State and federal agencies warned about the toxic material and asbestos in the dust and quickly told people to wear masks, if they found dust when they returned to their homes.

Plain paper or cloth masks were worn by more than 1,800 volunteers from the Southern Baptist Church, the Salvation Army and other groups who cleaned hundreds of apartments.

No one told them that of the 29 most available brands of masks on the market, only one contained filters fine enough to stop the microscopic asbestos fiber.

The EPA and the state and city told residents who knew they had asbestos to "mop it up, wash it down and throw it away" and "avoid inhaling dust while doing so."

But throughout the nation, asbestos removal is intensely regulated by state and federal law. The laws, which carry steep penalties, demand that the cleanup be done by personnel wearing special respirators, full head-to-toe protective suits and gloves, and the waste disposed of only at authorized sites.

The EPA and New York health departments point fingers at each other as the source of the misleading information.

Bellow admits that the EPA's web site linked to incorrect guidance for office and apartment landlords and renters.

"It wasn't our information. It was from the (New York) state or city health department, and we removed it from our Web site last month," the spokeswoman said. "Obviously, our asbestos program was overwhelmed by a catastrophe of this magnitude. We are usually only concerned with asbestos from renovations and building demolition."

However, a check of EPA's web Saturday found the same links were being used.

OLD MEDICAL IDEAS CLOUD ASBESTOS DECISIONS

When it came to the bureaucrats issuing medical information on asbestos, the contradictions were even more glaring.

The New York City Department of Health told residents that "asbestos-related lung disease results only from intense asbestos exposure experienced over a period of many years, primarily as a consequence of occupational exposures."

But the EPA's own experts as well as physicians at the CDC and private research centers have shown that a "single burst, heavy dose" of asbestos could be enough to cause the lethal disease. Last month, the EPA issued a report documenting that casual exposure to asbestos has caused disease.

The EPA, OSHA and New York health and environmental experts repeatedly told the public that the health risks are minimal because the asbestos fibers are so small.

Asbestos fibers are measured in microns, which are about 1/100th the thickness of a human hair. They are so tiny that they will stay aloft for hours or days. The collapse of the towers exacerbated the problem by pulverizing the fibers into even smaller, thinner fragments.

Years ago, asbestos researchers believed fibers greater than 5 microns long presented the only

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health hazard which would produce asbestosis, lung cancer and mesothelioma. This was due, in part, to the fact that the microscopes of that period couldn't easily detect fibers that small. Also, government asbestos regulations, which have always been heavily influenced by the asbestos industry, discounted the toxicity of short fibers.

"I don't even know whether EPA knows the very small fibers are there, but to say that small fibers are not dangerous defies logic," Granger said. "In most of the autopsies on asbestos victims, the predominance of fibers we see are small, are under five microns."

All the agencies play down the importance of test results that found dust samples that contained less than 1 percent asbestos.

"They keep calling it a trace. This implies to the public that there is no hazard from it," said Dr. Jerrold Abraham, director of environmental and occupational pathology at Upstate Medical University in Syracuse.

"If you're talking about pure chrysotile asbestos, there are 10 billion or more fibers per gram, or about a fifth of a teaspoon.

"Their whole measuring and reporting system needs to be made more honest."

The EPA's Bellow tried to answer the criticism.

"We didn't see ourselves as the primary source for information on what the health implications were. We're not a health agency," she said, adding that these are national issues that EPA headquarters should be addressing.

But headquarters has repeatedly declined to discuss these policy issues, even though before Sept. 11, the EPA was in turmoil over how to handle several asbestos problems throughout the nation.

Granger, who has studied the importance of risk communication, said the ball was dropped.

"We are talking about the very lives of these people and those they love," he said. "Because of the misleading or completely inaccurate government information and guidance, people don't know where to turn or whom to trust."

Meanwhile, starting Monday, NYCOSH, the unions' medical group, will make doctors and proper asbestos safety equipment available to the day laborers who are cleaning many buildings and apartments.

Later in the week, the city health department is expected to release its findings on the safety of apartment residents. Those who have seen the draft predict that the report will do little to end the controversy on the risk New Yorkers face from asbestos.

ASBESTOS AT GROUND ZERO

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Post-Dispatch: Mining town in Montana endured the horrors of disease from asbestos

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH**Mining town in Montana endured the horrors of disease from asbestos**

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By Andrew Schneider
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LIBBY, Mont. - Much of the asbestos-tainted vermiculite that spewed from the collapsing World Trade Center was dug from a mine in the Cabinet Mountains above this picturesque Kootenai River town. And in Libby, as in New York, environmental and health officials failed to disclose just how dangerous the mineral could be.

Miners digging vermiculite ore at the now-closed W.R. Grace Zonolite mine in Libby breathed dust containing asbestos fibers, then carried it home on their clothes to their wives and children. Trucks carrying the dust spread it throughout the town, and trains hauled the potentially lethal cargo to almost 300 towns across the nation.

The company knew it was deadly. But it did not require miners to wear respirators. Federal and state officials knew the dangers, but they looked the other way.

Until, that is, the death toll began to climb.

So far, hundreds of miners and their relatives have succumbed to the diseases caused by the asbestos fibers that painfully destroyed their lungs. Hundreds more are clinging to a torturous life, sucking air from portable oxygen bottles. And the federal government says its testing has found signs of the disease in thousands more who have been examined.

EPA and federal health investigators have been virtually living in this tiny town in the western corner of Montana just below the Canadian border since November 1999. Most arrived three days after the Seattle Post-Intelligencer reported the deaths and contamination.

They have studied the way asbestos kills - up close and far too personal.

Their findings make suspect many of the absolute statements the government is making in playing down the hazards those living in lower Manhattan face from asbestos.

On Dec. 20, Montana Gov. Judy Martz offered an early Christmas present to the people of the tiny town, a "silver bullet." Every governor has one, just one, to use in getting the Environmental Protection Agency to designate a site or community for a Superfund cleanup. The cleanup in Libby was needed not only to decontaminate the area around the old vermiculite mine, but also the houses, yards and playground filled with asbestos-containing dust.

Also on that day, the EPA issued a detailed, real-world risk assessment of what asbestos actually did to the people of Libby and those elsewhere in the nation who used or still use expanded vermiculite ore from the mine.

"If the risk to the people of Libby is high enough to warrant the imposition of a Superfund designation, why are government agencies just shrugging off the fact that many of the apartments and businesses in lower Manhattan have identical levels of asbestos or higher?" asks Cate Jenkins, a senior chemist in EPA's hazardous waste division.

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Little of what the government is doing about the asbestos from the twin towers surprised the people of Libby.

"It's the same damned government babble and indecision that led to half this town being either dead or dying from asbestos," says Les Skramstad, as he watches the news from New York.

"You'd think what happened here would have taught the government why it's important not to sweep this asbestos under the rug," says Skramstad, a former miner who is one of four members of his family with asbestosis from the vermiculite.

"Twenty or thirty years from now, when those New Yorkers start falling over dead, some young government bureaucrat will get all choked up apologizing for what the EPA and others didn't do.

"That's what they did here."

ASBESTOS AT GROUND ZERO

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AS Stated Above

The AS Stated Above There
are NO Airborne Filters

AS Stated above there were NO ~~airborne~~
Airborne Asbestos Filters detected, in
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