

16. Fiberglass—The Carcinogen that's Deadly and Everywhere

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<http://projectcensored.org/16-fiberglass-the-carcinogen-thats-deadly-and-everywhere/>

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Sources: RACHELS ENVIRONMENT & HEALTH WEEKLY #444 Date: 6/1/95; "A Carcinogen That's Everywhere"; Author: Peter Montague; IN THESE TIMES Date: 8/21/95; "Fiberglass, the Asbestos of the 90's"; Author: Joel Bleifuss

SYNOPSIS: A World War I era shortage of asbestos, once valued for its thermal insulation and fire resistant properties, spurred the first full-scale production of fiberglass in the United States. Unfortunately, man-made glass fibers have been found to share another characteristic with naturally-occurring asbestos fibers: they can cause lung cancer when inhaled.

According to the American Journal of Industrial Medicine, asbestos will have killed 300,000 Americans by the end of this century. As it was phased out, fiberglass production has steadily increased. More than 30,000 commercial products now contain fiberglass. Uses include thermal insulation, acoustic insulation, fireproofing and various applications in automotive components. Fiberglass insulation is present in 90 percent of American homes.

In the early 1970s, a body of evidence linking these ubiquitous fibers to lung disease began to accumulate. In a series of papers published from 1969 to 1977, the National Cancer Institute determined that tiny glass fibers were "potent carcinogens" in laboratory rats and that "it is unlikely that different mechanisms are operative in man." Specifically noted was the cancerous potential of fibrous glass in the pleura of lab animals. The pleura is the outer casing of the lungs; in humans, cancer of the pleura is called mesothelioma and it is caused by asbestos fibers.

The finding that fiberglass causes diseases similar to asbestos was chilling news in the early 1970s and an additional 25 years of research has only confirmed the earlier warnings. In 1990, members of the U.S. National Toxicology Program (NTP), who represent ten federal health agencies, stated unanimously: "Fiberglass may reasonably be anticipated to be a carcinogen" in humans. NTP was preparing to include fiberglass in its 1992 Seventh Annual Report on Carcinogens when politics intervened. Although fiberglass industry lobbying delayed publication of NTP's conclusions for two years, the report was sent to Congress in June 1994.

Following the report, Health and Human Services finally determined that fiberglass should be listed as a substance "for which there is limited evidence of carcinogenicity in humans and/or sufficient evidence of carcinogenicity in experimental animals." Yet the news made scarcely a ripple in the national media. In These Times learned from a source who asked to remain anonymous that ABC news executives bowed to industry pressure not to air a "20/20" investigation on the dangers of fiberglass. What coverage there was played down any threat to public health. Frank Swoboda and Maryann Haggerty in the Washington Post reported as fact the assertion of Public Health Service spokesman Bill Grigg that there is no data "that would indicate there's any problem that would involve any consumer or worker." Grigg ignored six epidemiological studies that showed otherwise.

Robert Horowitz, chairman of Victims of Fiberglass, said, “The arguments from industry are the same arguments that we’ve seen time and time again. It doesn’t matter what the substance is. Whether it is DDT or cigarettes or asbestos, industry says, “You can’t prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that we are killing you.’ But do we have to wait for that absolute scientific proof before we do something? Breathing in microscopic shards of glass could not possibly be good for you.”

SSU Censored Researcher: Mike Thomas

COMMENTS: Author Peter Montague, of the Environmental Research Foundation, said the subject received almost no media attention, “even after the U.S. National Toxicology Program (NTP) declared in June 1994 that fiberglass is ‘reasonably anticipated to be a carcinogen.’ This story should have been on every television set and in every newspaper. Unfortunately it was hardly covered at all. Part of the responsibility lies with government officials because they chose to minimize the importance of their own announcement. It seems to me, their purpose was most likely to protect the interest of the \$2 billion-per-year fiberglass industry.

“Fiberglass is pervasive in our society—90 percent of all homes are now insulated with it—and it will cause many cancers in the coming decades. It should be banned for the same reasons that asbestos has been banned. Of particular importance is the finding that fiberglass is now found everywhere in the environment. Forty years ago one could not measure fiberglass in the ambient air. Today fiberglass can be measured in the air on remote mountain tops in California. Since fiberglass is ‘reasonably anticipated to be a carcinogen,’ the public needs to know the facts about fiberglass, so that public health policy can evolve through informed debate.”

The National Toxicology Program (NTP) first proposed to list fiberglass as a probable carcinogen in its Seventh Annual (1993) Report on Carcinogens. “In response,” Montague said, “the North American Insulation Manufacturers Association (NAIMA) hired a former member of President Clinton’s transition team to lobby Donna Shalala, Secretary of Health and Human Services. After receiving a letter from NAIMA’s lobbyist, Secretary Shalala postponed the publication of the NTP report and called for an unprecedented review of NTP’s decision on fiberglass. Furthermore, NAIMA threatened to take legal action if the NTP listed fiberglass as a probable carcinogen. NAIMA has four members: CertainTeed Corp.; Owens-Corning Fiber Glass Corp; Knauf Fiber Glass GMBH; and Schuller International, Inc. (formerly Manville Co.).

“Donna Shalala eventually accepted NTP’s classification of fiberglass as a probable carcinogen but her agency downplayed the announcement of the NTP report and particularly downplayed the importance of declaring fiberglass a probable human carcinogen. The interests of the four corporations that comprise NAIMA are uniquely served by Secretary Shalala’s spin on the issue, and by the scant news coverage.”

Montague concludes that while the debate over the hazards of fiberglass continues to rage, “five billion pounds of new fiberglass are being added each year to the world’s growing inventory of this poison. As a result, our children will be breathing a few fibers of fiberglass with every breath they take, no matter where on earth they take it. This cannot be good news.”

Joel Bleifuss, author of the In These Times article, charged that the “potential threat to human health from fiberglass has received virtually no exposure in the mass media, with the exception of some very poor reporting in the Washington Post.” While some journalists were very interested in the subject, no major coverage resulted. For example, a reporter for a major television news program explored this story and invested a lot of time researching the subject. But the story was finally rejected by the executive producer after the reporter concluded that fiberglass was more harmful than the industry admits. Bleifuss acknowledged that

his concern about press freedom at a network news show is “more disturbing to me as a journalist than is the fact that a story about a public health threat was canned by a major network news executive.”

Bleifuss feels the fiberglass issue is a subject in dire need of public exposure. “Virtually every homeowner I know has at some time in their life installed fiberglass without a respirator. I have done so several times. Further, I believe that exposure of the issue would help curtail the dangerous practice of insulating houses with blown fiberglass particles.”

The politically powerful fiberglass industry is clearly benefiting from the limited coverage given this subject, according to Bleifuss who adds, “Dow Corning, which is particularly influential, is doing all it can to prevent fiberglass from becoming another asbestos-like scandal.”

In *These Times* published two letters concerning Bleifuss’ article in its November 13, 1995, issue. In one, Robert Horowitz, cited above in the synopsis, notes that formaldehyde, a known carcinogen, is used in manufacturing fiberglass insulation and believes it deserves further study. In the other, Catherine I. Imus, communications director for the North American Insulation Manufacturers Association, said, “...in the most recently completed review of the available scientific evidence regarding fiberglass, researchers at the Harvard School of Public Health concluded that “taken together, the data indicate that among those occupationally exposed, glass fibers do not appear to increase the risk of respiratory system cancer.”

Bleifuss responded that the review failed to examine published work by scientists whose research has shown fiberglass to be carcinogenic. And he points out, “This glaring omission is perhaps explained by the fact that the Harvard study was supported by a grant from the North American Insulation Manufacturers Association.”