



# Terrorised by Asbestos

Why are we in a panic about a material that's essentially harmless—and paying billions to get rid of it?

**J**IM WALLACE WAS thrilled when his grown-up daughter said she wanted to come and stay. Jim\*, 85, of Milford Haven, Pembrokeshire, decided to take the opportunity to extend his home to make an extra bedroom. But when the builders arrived they took one look at his house and downed tools: the ceilings were covered in the textured plaster Artex—which contains the mineral asbestos. No work would be done until this hazardous substance was removed, but the specialist contractor Jim called in demanded £3,500 per room to remove it, a cost Jim simply couldn't afford. How did his house become a death trap?

Government regulations require those who own or run commercial and public buildings to track down all asbestos and be prepared to “manage”

it, on the grounds that it might present a health risk. There is no legal requirement to do this in private homes, but individuals such as Jim can find themselves hamstrung. Even if he abandoned



\* Not his real name.

his building plans, he might never be able to sell his house: if a buyer's surveyor noticed the Artex, the buyer—or his mortgage lender—could refuse to go ahead until it is removed.

Yet asbestos is all round us. It's on the floor in vinyl floor tiles, on the ceiling in textured plaster, in bathroom cisterns, in the attic lagging pipes and in the basement insulating the boiler. Outside, it clads garages and garden sheds as well as farm buildings, factories and warehouses. In high buildings it's stuck to steel girders. On the road it can be in vehicle brake pads. If your oven gloves are old ones, it's in them too, and the ironing board. It would

take an estimated 30 years to get rid of it all.

So are we doomed? No. Because everyday low-level exposure to this stuff is effectively harmless.

**A**SBESTOS COMES IN three main types, distinguished by colour. Blue asbestos was used in special applications such as steam locomotives and ships' gun turrets. Brown asbestos often went into lagging and the insulation board used in homes and offices. Both of these minerals—finally banned in 1985—are composed of long, sharp, durable fibres. If inhaled these may, years later, trigger lung diseases such as

cancer and mesothelioma, now Britain's worst occupational disease with 1,800 deaths a year. These deaths are the tragic legacy of unsafe work practices in the past, before the dangers were realised.

But the blue and brown varieties comprise barely ten per cent of the material we know as asbestos. The remainder is white asbestos, also called chrysotile. It's a very different mineral, chemically akin to talcum powder. Fibres are soft, short and curly, and when inhaled mostly disappear in a few days. Combined with vinyl or cement, fibres are not only chemically changed but glued down so they cannot detach into the air.

As John Hoskins, a former inhalation toxicologist researching asbestos for the Medical Research Council, puts it, "In practical terms, the potential for high-density materials containing white asbestos to cause disease is virtually non-existent."

But when regulations to ban white asbestos in line with EU policy were framed, the Government lumped all asbestos together.

As a result, many citizens who find the material in their homes panic. When a Nottinghamshire couple found asbestos lagging pipes in the house they'd just bought, they spent £8,000 removing it, fearing for the safety of their children. "The

whole place seemed blighted," the children's mother says.

In fact a safer option would probably have been simply to seal the lagging

## The removal of asbestos is expensive and largely unnecessary. Let's stop stoking fear with spurious dangers

by spray painting it with an oil-based paint, at a cost of a few pounds. The Health and Safety Executive itself actually advises those with responsibility for property who find asbestos to leave it where it is as long as it's in good condition. ("Good condition", they explain, means that fibres cannot get airborne even if people are brushing against it. Bad condition means that it is flaking off and fibres are being released.)

Panic is inflamed by lawyers helping those suffering from lung diseases to claim compensation that already totals billions. Some imply that even a single fibre could kill. "This is nonsensical," says Hoskins. "Asbestos fibres constantly float in the air and we inhale at least one with every breath—ten thousand a day."

The removal of asbestos isn't just largely unnecessary, it is highly expensive—because it can't be done any old how. Take the old asbestos fire blanket that's been under my cooker for years in case a pan catches

fire. Following Health and Safety Executive guidelines to the letter, I should first don a special suit with a hood, a respirator and boots without laces, then spray the blanket with water to damp down the dust and drop it into a labelled plastic bag. Then I must turn the overalls inside out and put them

in the bag too and dispose of it in a special dump.

Given the fear induced by official advice such as this, it's hardly surprising that stripping asbestos out of our lives is turning into a phenomenal rip-off. Foot and mouth disease cost this country £3 billion and the BSE scare £3.5 billion. But we pay specialist asbestos removal contractors around £3 billion *every year*.

- Half a bucket of asbestos chips were found on the suspended ceiling of a bowling alley; health officials wanted to close it down and a contractor demanded £85,000 to deal with the problem.

- A church found a small piece of asbestos in the box containing its electric organ motor; a contractor demanded £105,000 to clean the church and destroy curtains, carpets and prayer cushions.

- Residents in a block of flats in Kensington paid £60,000 to remove "asbestos" lagging—that turned out to be horsehair.

John Bridle, who has had a lifetime

in the industry, was so horrified that he set up a consultancy called Asbestos Watchdog. His website ([www.asbestoswatchdog.co.uk](http://www.asbestoswatchdog.co.uk)) gets 3,000 hits a day and in three years he has dealt with 6,000 cases, including the three above. In every instance, when Bridle intervened, he convinced authorities that the asbestos was safe and work unnecessary. "The legal situation is a licence for shady

operators to prey on people's anxieties," he says.

It's time for some common sense about the safety of products made with white asbestos. In the US, a brief ban on chrysotile was invalidated in 1991 and asbestos-related lung diseases are declining. Real risks must of course be recognised, but let's stop stoking fear—and lining the pockets of those who exploit it—with spurious dangers.



### LEARNING FROM OUR MISTAKES

As part of her confirmation training, my daughter Cathy had to select a virtue she promised to work on. She chose perseverance.

Unfortunately, she found out that she had to embroider that word on a sash for the confirmation ceremony.

"I'm switching virtues, Dad," Cathy informed me.

"To what?"

"Joy."

JAMES MAGUIRE

"Dad!!!!!!" It was Zachary, my four-year-old son, calling from the bathroom. "My toothbrush fell into the toilet!"

"Let's get you another one," I said, throwing it into the bin.

"That's full of bad germs now."

The next thing I knew he was handing me my toothbrush.

"Then we better throw this one out too. I dropped it in the toilet last week."

JOHN BOOTHMAN

### THE WRONG END OF THE STICK

I was sitting in a cafeteria recently, next to a woman who was engrossed in her newspaper. One of the headlines blared: "12 Brazilian Soldiers Killed." She shook her head at the sad news. Then, turning to me, asked, "How many is a Brazilian?"

WILLIAM TOLAR