

Asbestos in Athabasca

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asbestos was present in the workshop noting the grey-beige dust laying in chunks about the heater above her head, and sprinkling the floor. She had samples tested, and they were confirmed as being 51 per cent chrysotile asbestos. Asbestos content must be under 20 per cent to be considered safe.

The workshop is particularly dangerous because of the lack of proper ventilation. Especially since the students use solvents such as turpentine, with poisonous fumes. This was the subject of a student's petition in 1983, but nothing was done for them.

According to Ross, the two tiny windows there created a draft that wafted the asbestos into the air.

Concerned about the hazardous environment of Workshop III and her own health, Ross made the University aware of the situation. She sued the University, pressing charges of common nuisance. She claimed that the University should have inspected the workshop, discovered the loose asbestos in the air, and protected the students from undue exposure.

In the Small Claims Court, Ross claimed thirteen actions, of \$2,000 each, totalling \$26,000 in damages. Her complaint was mental anguish.

"When I think of the day I discovered it was asbestos..." said Ross, horrified, recalling her nausea, loss of coherence, loss of appetite and dizziness. However, the court ruled that these complaints were likely caused by her perception of danger, and panic rather than by asbestos. These complaints were likely actions as one, making the total

amount too large for the small Claims Court.

In court, Ross (representing herself) had to prove the act, cause, and the damage, with material evidence. But she was unable to prove that there had been asbestos in the air at the time she was breathing it. Nor could she indicate the size and amount of asbestos that may have been present.

Ross was unable to show the results of the samples she had taken, as she had taken them without an official witness. No experts would take the witness stand on her behalf to state that the circumstances endangered the health of the students.

The result was that her extensive research on asbestos in previous similar cases was inadmissible evidence. She was not even allowed to use the word 'asbestos'.

"It was a joke," stated Ross. Her abortive court case has left Ross frustrated. She is angered by the apathetic, patronizing reaction of the University. She was not taken seriously, and was told that she was "overreacting". "Nobody gave me any support whatsoever."

That included her former classmates, who were presumably also in danger. Hundreds of students must have been exposed to this asbestos over the last few years. But no one wanted to get involved. "It's almost as if I was invisible — as if I didn't exist."

However, the efforts of Kettle Ross have not been totally in vain. After hearing her complaint, the University, in January 1984, removed as much asbestos as possible from the workshop. They covered

the asbestos-coated equipment in order to prevent the asbestos from mixing with the air. The area is now safe, as confirmed by Dick Der, the Studio Technician, and Mr. Pretzlaff of the University Maintenance Service.

This clean-up is a part of the extensive maintenance program of the university, said Pretzlaff.

The program includes the removal of hazards like asbestos, and the renovation of dangerous areas of the University. The program began four years ago, and will continue for a few more years to come. It involves continual inspection and, if necessary, remedial work.

Areas are given attention according to priority system of the level of potential hazards present. Certain areas of the Biological Sciences, the Home-Economic Sciences, and the Dental-Pharmacy buildings are now being worked upon.

The renovations will make life safer for future generations. But the damage, if there indeed has been any, to Ross has already been done.

It is impossible to calculate exactly the amount of asbestos Ross has been exposed to, or whether it will result in illness. She has not yet suffered any ill effects. She can only hope that she does not contract an asbestos-related disease in the future.

Ross is understandably upset about the whole affair.

Commenting on the right to a safe working/studying environment, she said: "It's something so fundamental that it's taken for granted."

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