

ASBESTOS:

"a question of priorities"

At 7:00 p.m. I took the faculty elevator down to the basement level. There was no notification that asbestos related work was being undertaken in this area. As I left the elevator I was confronted by two workmen dressed in white rubber suits wearing respirators and several large notices indicating "Asbestos Dust - Caution" which were posted on the walls. I quickly fled this area, realizing the hazard.

Law Professor Judy Fudge in a memorandum to Osgoode Administration

By HOWARD KAMAN

Asbestos is the collective name given to various minerals when they are found in an unusual, fibrous state. When in fibrous form, these minerals are known for their stiffness, heat and chemical resistance, and electro-conductivity. Because of these qualities, people have found many uses for asbestos. For example, asbestos makes fine insulation for buildings because it prevents fire from contacting the metal beams onto which it is sprayed. As metal is brittle when hot, it is important to protect it; asbestos performs this job admirably.

But it is also carcinogenic.

This dangerous substance was used in the construction of the Osgoode Hall Law School in 1967, and 22 years later, it is falling apart.

At Osgoode hall, the controversy over asbestos has existed a long time. Faculty, staff, and students have been worried about air contamination for years and, although the asbestos is located between the ceilings and floors, it is this area that forms the building's return air plenum. It is the air in this plenum that has Osgoode concerned.

Terence Ison, Chairman of the Osgoode

Asbestos Removal Committee (OARC), is concerned about the dangers that the asbestos presents. Ison organized a protest in March 1987 to press the issue of removal. At the walkout, a petition of over 800 signatures was presented to York president Harry Arthurs.

The same week the protest took place, some asbestos was found exposed in several storage rooms at Osgoode. Upon discovering the asbestos openly exposed to the air, Gilles Arsenault, a member of Osgoode's maintenance staff at the time, lodged a complaint against the University. Arsenault stated that the University had not warned the staff about the existence of the asbestos, and that he knew nothing of it until a CBC television crew was ushered into the room to cover the protest.

Since that time, the asbestos exposed in the rooms has been removed, but the amount remaining, just under 80 per cent, has not been touched.

Before the protest, 20 per cent of the building's asbestos had been removed. In 1983, the Ministry of Colleges and Universities granted York \$210,000 for the project and in 1986, the asbestos was removed, at a cost of about \$177,000.

At the March '87 protest, the remaining



BABAK AMIRFEZ

HEALTH HAZARD: The asbestos used in the construction of Osgoode Hall Law School, 22 years ago, has many staff and students nervous. A carcinogenic, asbestos causes asbestosis, mesothelioma and lung cancer when inhaled.

asbestos was described as being "in excellent condition," by David Kurosky, then Director of Occupational Health and Safety.

The conflict over the asbestos issue consists of two camps: Those who want it removed, and those who want it controlled.

The Asbestos Institute is a non-profit organization set up in 1984 to promote the safe use of asbestos products. Made up of representatives from industry, labour, and government, it wants controlled monitoring of the substance, as opposed to removal.

As it ages, spray-on asbestos insulation becomes brittle and falls apart easily. Osgoode's asbestos, located in the return air plenum between floors and ceilings, is in an area where an occasional disturbance of the fragile asbestos is not uncommon.

The relative calm of areas like the return air plenum, where asbestos is located, is a large part of The Asbestos Institute's argument that control is better. They argue that, if left alone, asbestos will not fall apart and harm the atmosphere. In addition, regular testing of the air in the building must be done, to ensure that safe levels are maintained.

The air in Osgoode Hall is tested for asbestos every six months.

Those wanting asbestos removed argue

that, no matter how often air testing is done, it is not often enough. Ison emphasized the relationship between asbestos and the three potentially fatal diseases caused by it: asbestosis, mesothelioma, and lung cancer. According to a report he wrote in 1985, "The degree of risk to those currently using the building is not exactly known. Most people are here long enough to cause any of the asbestos-related diseases if there is sufficient exposure."

Ison's report emphasizes that the periodic testing of the air is not enough, because a constant test is required: "Measuring the levels of asbestos fibres in the ambient air has been handicapped so far by the absence of any device that would provide a continuous reading." Ison also points out that levels in the building are not consistently the same, due to the circumstances in the building.

"If the asbestos does deteriorate, causing elevated levels," says Ison, "there may be a time lag of several months before that is known."

For instance, Osgoode Hall is often subject to flooding, as a result of its flat roof, and the results of a test done two months after a flood does little to determine the quality of the air during, or immediately following, the incident.

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