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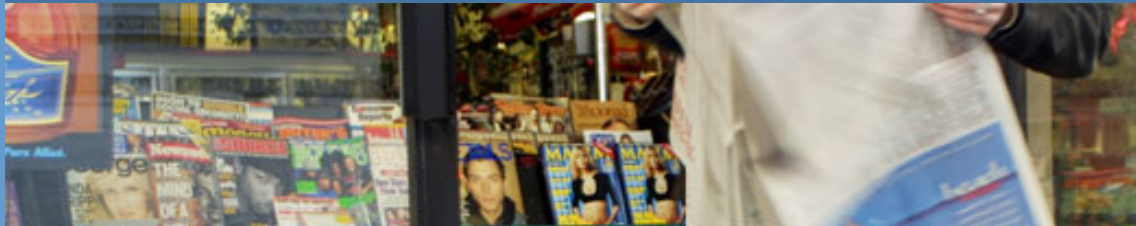
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Monday, May 13, 2002

#### A DUTY TO WARN: ASBESTOS

LAST week, the Environmental Protection Agency said it would immediately remove asbestos-contaminated insulation from hundreds of homes in Libby, Mont.

But it won't even warn homeowners in the rest of the country that their houses could contain the same dangerous substance.

Post-Dispatch reporter Andrew Schneider reports that the insulation, called Zonolite, is in an estimated 1.2 million homes in Missouri and Illinois, as well as millions more around the country.

Left alone, Zonolite isn't much of a hazard. But if it is disturbed -- and it could be disturbed by something as innocuous as adding a light fixture -- it can release dangerous asbestos fibers at levels that are dozens of times beyond what's considered safe.

In February when he first revealed the dangers of Zonolite, Mr. Schneider wrote about a St. Louis man named Edward Harashe, who added the insulation to his home in 1951. Four decades later, Mr. Harashe died of asbestos-related causes.

Zonolite came from an 80-year-old vermiculite mine owned by W.R. Grace Co. in tiny Libby. The death rate from asbestos-related diseases is 40 to 60 times the national average.

In September, EPA Administrator Christine Todd Whitman said her agency would do a better job protecting the public because of the hard-won knowledge about asbestos toxicity it gained there. "We want everyone who comes in contact with vermiculite -- from homeowners to handymen -- to have the information needed to protect themselves and their families," Ms. Whitman said.

Those sentiments have apparently been trumped by a more practical concern. The cost of removing Zonolite insulation from every American home could reach \$10 billion. Even so, the cost of warning homeowners would be considerably less.

Technically, the job of protecting Americans from dangerous products belongs to the

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Consumer Product Safety Commission. But it has remained on the sidelines. The EPA is familiar with the danger and in a position to do something about it.

Two years have passed since doctors from the U.S. Public Health Service asked the government to warn homeowners and contractors about the risks of Zonolite. Still nothing has been done.

If the insulation is hazardous in Libby, it's equally hazardous in St. Louis. It's time for Ms. Whitman to make good on her promise and to warn the public.

*Tuesday, February 12, 2002*

### **CLEAR THE AIR: WORLD TRADE CENTER**

A RESTLESS crowd packed the lobby of a New York hotel on the evening of Oct. 3, 2001. More than 1,500 residents of Lower Manhattan had come to confront environmental officials about the aftermath of Sept. 11. When the residents complained of sore throats, skin rashes and burning eyes, they were told there was no reason for alarm.

Fears about contaminants in dust from the collapsed twin towers were dismissed. "It's not a health concern," said Joel A. Miele Sr., the city's environmental commissioner.

Mr. Miele should have known better. By the time that meeting was held, some of America's top scientists had already analyzed the dust. As Andrew Schneider reported in Sunday's Post-Dispatch, the scientists concluded that the dust was highly caustic and potentially a serious health threat. Some of the samples were as corrosive as drain cleaner.

As soon after the attack as Sept. 27, the scientists' work was posted on a Web site restricted to government agencies. Yet as recently as last week, many of those responsible for the safety of residents and rescue workers still were unaware of the study. Meanwhile, public officials, including U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Christine Todd Whitman, continue to insist that the dust poses no special health hazard. A growing body of evidence casts doubt on that claim.

Given the unprecedented nature of the Sept. 11 attacks, some initial glitches in the emergency response were understandable. But serious and persistent questions have been raised about environmental testing and how the results were -- or were not -- made public.

Public health officials, doctors and union leaders all told Mr. Schneider that specific test results were needed to make informed safety decisions for workers and residents. "It is inexcusable for the EPA to have kept silent for so long about such a potential hazard," said Joel Shufro, of the New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health, an advocacy group composed of unions, physicians and others concerned about job safety.

It's hardly the first time that the EPA has been accused of misleading the public or withholding information. Just days after the attacks, Ms. Whitman told New Yorkers "that their air is safe to breathe and their water is safe to drink." What she didn't say was that her statement was based on tests done outdoors, where contaminants can quickly dissipate. Indoor air, the EPA later decided, was not its responsibility.

Other early tests performed for the EPA showed substantially elevated levels of lead and benzene, as well as PCBs, dioxin and chromium. That was not immediately disclosed. Federal officials later said the results were "overlooked."

This week, a Senate committee began hearings on possible health hazards from the World Trade Center collapse. Among the topics to be explored are questions raised by Mr. Schneider's reporting.

Whatever the committee finds about health hazards in lower Manhattan, it's long past time to clear the air.

*Tuesday, January 15, 2002*

## NEW RISKS RISE FROM THE ASHES: ASBESTOS

INTO the atmosphere of sudden vulnerability that pervaded New York after Sept. 11, Christine Todd Whitman injected a bit of much-needed good news.

"I am glad to reassure the people of New York ... that their air is safe to breathe and their water is safe to drink," said Ms. Whitman, who heads the Environmental Protection Agency. She made the pronouncement only a few days after the World Trade Center collapsed.

Four months later, that statement is in doubt. A growing body of evidence suggests that the hazards to those who live and work in Lower Manhattan are, at best, unknown. As reported Sunday in the Post-Dispatch by Andrew Schneider, people living and breathing that air may be at substantially increased risk of contracting cancer.

Ms. Whitman might have added to the fear and worry of New Yorkers had she said that the health risks were unknown, or at least not well-understood. But by declaring the area safe, she gave false reassurance to thousands of people anxious to resume their lives. They moved back into apartments, businesses and neighborhoods coated with dust containing asbestos and other potentially hazardous substances.

There was ample evidence early on to suggest a more cautious approach. Some tests performed for the EPA found substantially elevated levels of lead and benzene, both of which can cause serious health effects, as well as PCBs, dioxin and chromium. The test results were not immediately disclosed. Federal officials said they were "overlooked" in the chaos surrounding the terrorist attack.

What the tests did not find in large concentrations was asbestos, which was surprising, since asbestos was used as fireproofing in parts of the twin towers. The reason asbestos was not found, Mr. Schneider reported, was that EPA scientists used outdated methods to look for asbestos fibers. They also discounted the presence of very tiny fibers as health hazards, despite recent studies showing that even tiny fibers can cause serious disease. Responding to critics who contend that the EPA's asbestos measuring and reporting system is outdated, an EPA spokesman replied: "We're not a health agency."

That excuse is not available to public health officials in New York, whose lapses were every bit as serious as the EPA's. The New York Health Department told residents asbestos-related lung disease results only from years of occupational exposure. Yet newer scientific evidence suggests disease could result from a single, intense exposure.

Inexcusably, contractors, unions and public agencies in New York also allowed hundreds of untrained day laborers to scrub toxic dust out of buildings without the benefit of proper protective equipment.

Last week, the EPA ombudsman's office started looking into charges that the agency may have concealed evidence of contamination at the disaster site. That investigation may lead to new questions about how the clean-up beyond Ground Zero should proceed. Meanwhile, the government should review the way it communicates risk to an anxious public and take immediate steps to minimize the risk of long-term health problems for workers and residents.

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