

Asbestos and a Worker's Death

Exposure in Building Trade Center Blamed

By Barbara Fischkin

Hugh Bernard Lawrence Gallagher stood on a scaffold 110 stories high and watched as a final piece of structural steel, ceremoniously decorated with a flapping American flag, was bolted onto the still-unfinished north tower of the World Trade Center. As chief steel inspector for one of the world's most famous buildings, it was Gallagher's job to make sure that the ultimate slab, like all the others before it, was put on right.

That was 15 years ago this month. Gallagher was then 55, a confirmed bachelor who was both exacting and sentimental about his work on what was to become New York's tallest structure. Those who knew him say that on that windy December day when the first tower was "topped off," Gallagher — known as "Hughie" to friends, "Barney" to relatives — took many proud, deep breaths.

Deep breaths and strong lungs had always figured in his life. As a Navy diver during World War II, he plunged into the Pacific to search the wreckage of sunken ships. He gave bagpipe lessons at an Irish dance hall — his parents were from County Donegal — and played the pipes every year in the St. Patrick's Day Parade.

But over Labor Day weekend this year, Hughie Gallagher died gasping for air. In a lawsuit filed before he died at age 69, Gallagher blamed a now-banned asbestos fireproofing preparation that was sprayed on almost 3,000 steel trusses on the lower floors of his beloved World Trade Center tower. Gallagher, like other workers there, said he had been exposed to the spray without being warned that he needed protection such as masks and respirators.

Gallagher is believed to be the first among the workers on the World Trade Center to die from malignant mesothelioma, a cancer of the lining of the lungs, chest or abdomen that has been strongly linked to exposure to asbestos fibers. There are grim predictions that other deaths may follow.

Meanwhile, the trade center's asbestos saga has come full circle. Now, months after Gallagher's death and more than a decade after he claims he was first exposed, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, which runs the complex, has decided to remove the asbestos as soon as it finds a safe way to do it. The process is expected to cost millions of dollars and take as long as eight years.

At least one other lawsuit has been filed by a worker who claims he became ill as the result of exposure to asbestos at the tower, now called World Trade Center One. John Cahill, 68, of Queens, a former construction inspector and an old friend of Gallagher's, was diagnosed as having asbestosis, a scar-



Photo by Donna Dietrich
John Cahill, above, and with a jacketless Hugh Gallagher atop World Trade Center One, at left.

ring of the lungs that causes shortness of breath.

Because construction workers are employed at many sites — and because smoking is common among them — it is generally difficult to determine exactly what made them ill. For example, a sheet-metal worker who died from mesothelioma several years ago had worked at the World Trade Center and numerous other sites where he was exposed to asbestos. This summer, a 49-year-old elevator builder, who worked for about five years on the trade center's construction, died of lung cancer. His physician said he smoked enough cigarettes to contract the cancer. (According to some scientists and physicians, however, a person who smokes and is exposed to asbestos has five times the chance of getting lung cancer as smokers who are not exposed. Smoking also increases the chance of death for those who have asbestosis).

Preliminary data taken from a Montefiore Hospi-

tal study of about 800 sheet-metal workers with 30 years or more experience points to what may be some other cases. Union officials say it is likely some men in the study worked on the trade center while the asbestos was being sprayed. The study showed that 20 percent were likely to have asbestos-related diseases other than cancer.

"There's going to be a significant amount of disease to come from that building," says Miles O'Malley, executive director of the New York chapter of the White Lung Association, a national organization for those who have been exposed to asbestos. Dr. Irving J. Selikoff, an internationally recognized expert on asbestos-related disease and a professor emeritus of the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in Manhattan, recommends that "all people who have worked at maintenance at the World Trade Center be examined as soon as possible."

But, as O'Malley and Selikoff point out, the trade center is far from an isolated case. Rather, it is a symbol of a much larger problem.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency estimates that of 3.6 million buildings used by the public in the country — including offices, libraries and apartment buildings with more than five units — 730,000 contain asbestos.

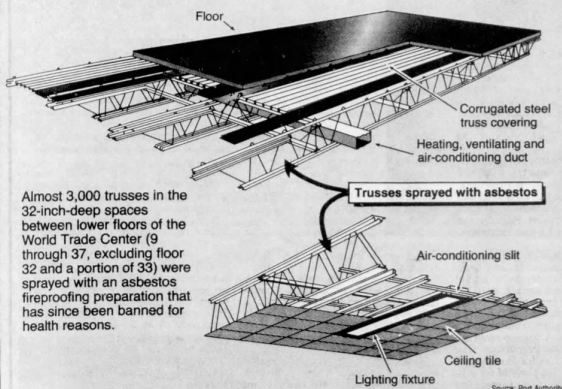
Particularly during the 1960s and the very early 1970s, many buildings were sprayed with the same type of asbestos fireproofing used at the World Trade Center. Many workers who came in contact with the substance did not know it was dangerous until years later, in part because diseases linked to asbestos exposure take many years to develop. Now, however, there is widespread concern about the material, which, as it ages, emits fibers that are dangerous to inhale. The dangers also have prompted a controversy over whether it is safer to try to contain the asbestos already in buildings or try to remove it, thus risking release of the fibers. Last month, the City Council passed new restrictions — among the country's most comprehensive — for workers who remove asbestos from buildings.

Gallagher and Cahill are also typical of the types of workers exposed to asbestos. Gallagher worked at shipyards in Canada and Brooklyn and could have come in contact with asbestos at those jobs, although he told his attorney that his only other exposure occurred when he worked at the World's fair in Flushing Meadows in the 1960s. Cahill was a heavy smoker until he became ill. Gallagher's attorney, Norman Landau, said that his client, who retired in 1982, also was exposed while supervising remodeling and alterations after the tower was built. The trusses that had been sprayed with asbestos were coated with a paint-like sealant to prevent fibers from escaping. But Landau says that the trusses, located in areas above the dropped ceiling, are disturbed when repairs are made and the fibers escape anyway.

Selikoff plans to study Gallagher's case. About

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The Dangerous Precaution



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