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## CORRESPONDENCE

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### Asbestos and cancer: history and public policy

Sir,—In his support for Murray's version of the history of the awareness of the human health hazards of exposure to asbestos, Kelso (1992;49:526) puts down Weller (1992;49:70-2) for his "emotional outbursts", "bland statements", and "employment of old worn out clichés" (sic), and accuses him of being selective in his references.

Lee and Selikoff are presented as highly respected researchers when Kelso quotes extensively from them in support of his piece of polemic. (Old hands will appreciate the irony of seeing Selikoff, demonised as an irresponsible demagogue in his lifetime when he impartially goaded the responsible bodies into urgent action on asbestos, being lauded posthumously by a representative of the industry.) As Selikoff cannot answer for himself, I would offer in his defence that when he was writing in 1974, he would have been unaware of important information subsequently discovered as a result of litigation: a second edition of *Asbestos and disease* would have required significant revision of a number of judgements.

Enterline is quoted as referring to the adversarial positions taken up by the "experts" in the early 1960s. To be fair to him, he also gives as one of the reasons for the delay in the general acceptance of a relation between asbestos and cancer: "There were economic reasons, since the asbestos industry probably exercised some control over research, and findings unfavourable to the use of asbestos were clearly not in their interest (*Am J Ind Med* 1991;20:685-700)." There is support for his hypothesis of conspiracy in the confidential unpublished reports of the Saranac Laboratory that were available to sympathetic parties from the late 1930s onwards and have been added to by legal discovery.

Kelso challenges Weller's conclusion that industry hazarded men's lives for commercial gain as not based on scientific principles and facts. Nearer home, Kelso has the fact of Wittenoom where conditions

were appalling by the standards of the time, and where there has been a substantial health hazard. In this instance, Weller is wrong. For all the loss of life, there was little in the way of commercial gain.

Kelso offers the old apologia: "How could industrialists take action when medical opinion was not agreed?" This does certain industrialists less than justice. They were far from naïve: some were persuaded despite the doubts expressed by their experts, that asbestos was a hazardous material, and periodically stepped up environmental controls in their plants.

The general reader must understand that the resurgence of an interest in the history of awareness of asbestos hazard is of more than academic interest. Each publication on the topic, where prepublication copies have not already been supplied, is systematically retrieved by attorneys employed in the asbestos litigation industry where the financial stakes and rewards are large.

MORRIS GREENBERG

*Department of Public Health  
and Primary Care  
Royal Free Hospital School of Medicine,  
Rowland Hill Street,  
London NW3 2PF*

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## NOTICES

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**University of Cincinnati, NIOSH Educational Resource Centre, Environmental and Occupational Health and Safety, continuing education courses, January-July 1993.**

**Lead abatement training for inspectors.** 16-18 March, 1993; 19-21 July, 1993 (Summer Institute)

The primary purpose of this course is to train individuals to inspect for lead based paint. The course also teaches individuals to inspect for other sources of lead, such as water, soil, and dust. Call 513/558-1730 for more information. 2.1 CEUs, ABIH points applied for. Fee: \$500 (additional \$50 for optional examination), \$545—Summer Institute.

**OSHA lockout/tagout and electrical work practice standards.** 12-13 July, 1993 (Summer Institute)

This new two day course is designed to assist businesses in setting up their electrical safety programmes for compliance with the new OSHA regulations. Trainees will be given complete instruction on OSHA 29 CFR, Section 1910.331-.335 as well as hands on training on state of the art equipment. Call 513/558-1730 for more information. 1.4 CEUs, 1.4 CSPs. Fee: \$350.

**OSHA hazard communication compliance.** 8 February, 1993

This course will give participants information on complying with all aspects of the OSHA Hazard Communication Standard, including the written plan, material safety data sheets, labelling, and employee training. Call 513/558-1730 for more information. 0.7 CEUs. Fee: \$195.

**Environmental assessments and audits training.** 3-7 May, 1993

This course will provide the "how to" for various kinds of environmental site assessments and audits. Information will be provided to guide in the preparation of preassessment data gathering plans for both simple types of clean site audits and the complex industrial setting. Call 513/558-1730. 3.5 CEUs, 2.5 ABIH points, 3.5 CSP points. Fee: \$850.

**Health risk assessment: principles and techniques.** 22-23 March, 1993

Concepts of health risk assessment including hazard assessment, dose-response definition, exposure assessment, and risk characterisation are presented. 1 ABIH point, 1 CEU. Call 513/558-1730 for information. Fee \$275 (\$850 if taken with "advanced risk assessment").

**Advanced risk assessment: biological and environmental modelling.** 24-26 March, 1993

Participants will gain direct, hands on experience in the application of environmental, physiological, and dose-response extrapolation models to risk assessment questions. Each