



LETTER TO THE EDITOR

(AUGUST 31, 2011)

ANSWER TO THE LETTER OF JOHN LANGE ET AL.

Thank you for your comment which is a valuable addition to our work. It is important to highlight the current, still unresolved, problem of assessing occupational exposures and health effects among asbestos abatement workers (AAW) engaged in removing asbestos-containing building materials. Currently, in countries in which the use of asbestos has been banned, they constitute a major group of workers occupationally exposed to asbestos dust. We fully agree that, because of the level and nature of exposure of abatement workers (AAW), they are a different group than asbestos workers (AW) involved in manufacturing and installing asbestos-containing materials (ACM). Data from preventive examinations of former workers of asbestos processing plants included in our paper, as well as data on the number of asbestos-related occupational diseases refer to those two groups, i.e. AW and ACM. Works intended to remove asbestos materials from buildings in Poland were conducted only in the last decade. This is obviously too short period to assess the risk of long-latency asbestos-related diseases in AAW, while the conjecture about the negligible risk seems to be supported by no reports of such diseases to the Central Register of Occupational Diseases. We agree also with the view expressed in a commentary based on the research and experience of the Authors [1,2] that in the current conditions of exposure to asbestos dust, too little attention is paid to the lifestyle factors (smoking, alcohol, drug use), which significantly modify the risk attributable to the exposures occurring in the workplace. Observations and analyses of very low concentrations of asbestos fibers in the breathing zone of AAW recorded during demolition work induced the team of our Institute's

Reference Center for Asbestos Exposure and Health Risk Assessment to start in 2007 work on the liberalization of rules relating to the removal of asbestos-cement boards in open space (outdoors). These boards are in Poland the main source of emissions of asbestos fibers into the air of the municipal environment. The expert group, on the basis of literature data and results available from measurements of concentrations of asbestos fibers performed at workplaces of people dismantling outdoor asbestos-cement structures have concluded that it is reasonable to alleviate the laws on this type of work. Analysis of about 450 measurements carried out in recent years has shown that the concentrations of asbestos fibers at workplaces during the removal of asbestos-containing products in the open air are not likely to exceed the level of 0.001 f/cm^3 , which corresponds to 0.01 of the current MAC value. At the same time, the recommended liberalization maintains the existing rules for exposure assessment and health of the workers engaged in the work of disassembling indoor asbestos products known as soft asbestos products [3].

Conditions for the introduction of the liberalization of the Polish regulations require further legal and organizational steps to be taken to ensure the safety to AAW and protect the environment. Definition of the criteria of sporadic and low-intensity exposure to asbestos dust, the concepts included in the Directive of the European Parliament, is difficult and gives rise to much controversy [4], and thus these criteria are defined and implemented by the individual countries for their own use.

We would like to point out that the implementation of large-scale programs intended to eliminate asbestos in country areas is associated with the danger of taking

action which is not necessarily beneficial to public health. As an example we may quote the use, contrary to the opinions of experts, of potentially unsafe methods for disposal of asbestos in asbestos-cement boards by crushing them and then treating with microwaves in a mobile device [5]. The rationale for introducing this “innovative” methods of dealing with the eternit boards was a huge amount of asbestos waste generated as a result of the implementation of the Program of elimination asbestos in Poland.

REFERENCES

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3. Nofer Institute of Occupational Medicine. *Development of assumptions and justifications of the liberalization of removing asbestos cement roofing outdoors and the detailed rules of conduct while performing this work* [unpublished report]. Contract IV/500/15095/2840/DIW/10; 2010 [in Polish].
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5. *The act of 22 January 2010 amending the Waste Act and other laws*. J Laws 2010, No. 28, item 145 [in Polish].

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