

Agencies scrutinize asbestos use

Presence of carcinogenic substance in schoolrooms prompts investigations

By JACK CONDLIFFE
Of the Emerald

Going to school may be hazardous to your health if sprayed-on asbestos insulation and soundproofing were used on the ceiling and walls of the school building.

Asbestos is one of the most carcinogenic substances known to man. Last year, the federal government noted a cancer epidemic was sweeping ship-builders who installed asbestos insulation on warships in World War II.

Yet, asbestos still remains in widespread use because of its excellent heat and fire-resistant properties.

Sprayed-on asbestos came under scrutiny after Indian Hill Elementary School in Holmdel, N. J. closed because a ceiling sprayed with asbestos flaked exposing school children to a serious hazard. The school was reopened after classroom ceilings were replaced.

Al Wicklund, public information officer of the New Jersey Department of Education, said there were no reported health problems. But, he adds, "The problem with that is it takes a long time (for cancer to develop). You really can't tell."

Outside Portland, Beaverton School District officials had a similar scare last year and called in the State Accident Insurance Fund to determine if a hazard existed to teachers or students following an investigation.

The problem in detecting whether or not sprayed-on asbestos has been used is that an X-ray analysis must be made according to Mike Rodia of the state Workers Compensation Department.

Rodia said his department is concerned because of the hazards to teachers as employees, which gives him "indirect authority over students."

Rodia says that sprayed-on asbestos is not used often anymore and adds that problems with the substance are mostly restricted to older buildings.

Rodia expressed concern about use of the material in private homes, over which his department has no authority. Rodia said he knew of an individual who had used the substance and subsequently took readings for airborne asbestos.

Readings show the presence of asbestos in the air inside the individual's home lasted for months.

Airborne asbestos is the issue of concern to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Air and Waste Management Office. The EPA issued regulations on the contents of sprays in June.

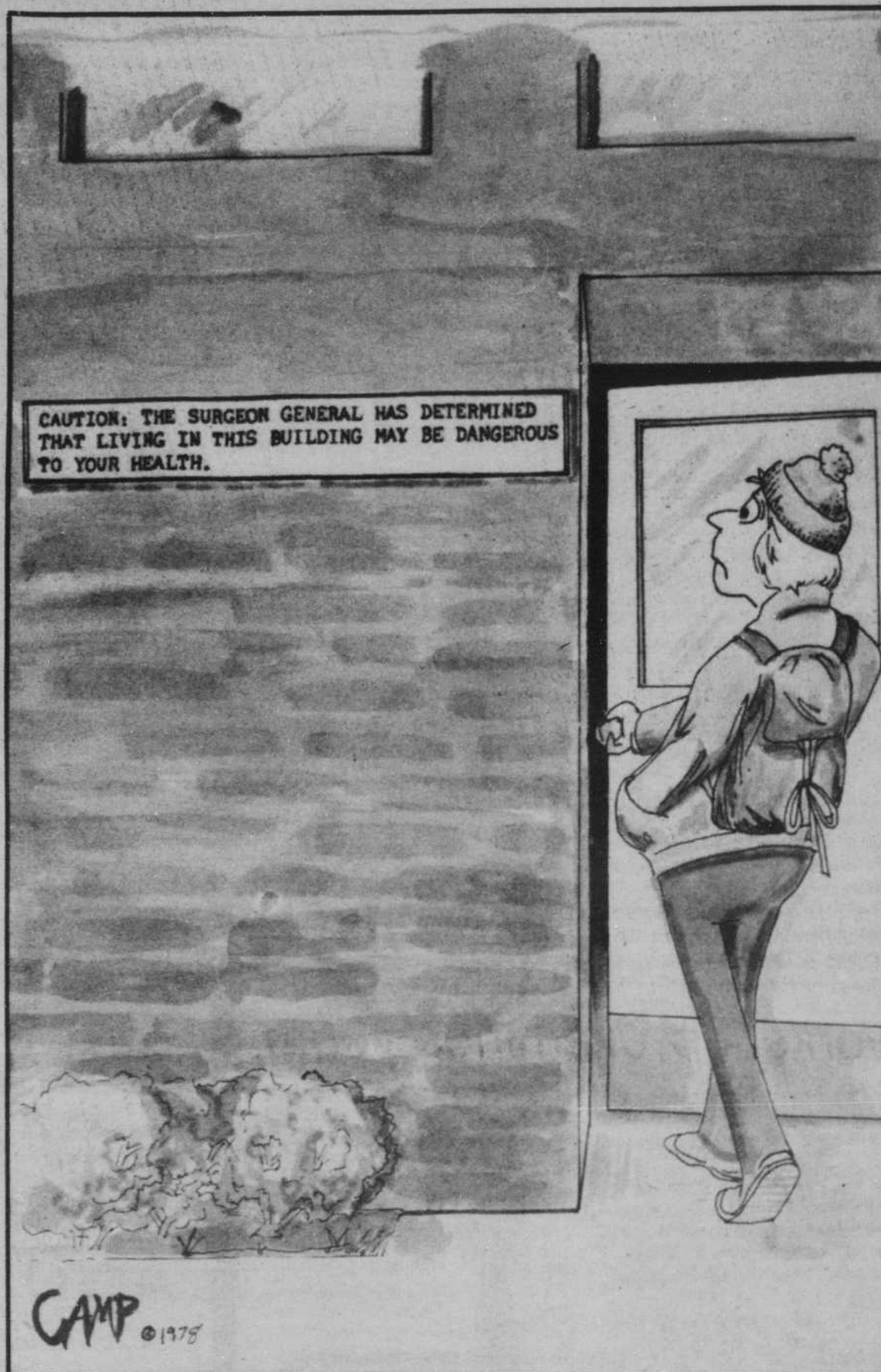
Dave Bray of the EPA says these regulations "prohibit spray application of materials for any use if it contains more than one percent asbestos."

Bray indicated that many of the sprays examined while drawing up the regulations contained as much as 60 to 70 percent asbestos.

He also indicated the EPA investigated whether the sprays were "viable." In other words, whether the spray would stay on ceiling and wall surfaces.

The EPA determined that the spray-on substance should not come off. But, he acknowledged, only problems of airborne asbestos during the application process were of concern to his agency.

Problems with flaking ceilings are outside the EPA's jurisdiction.



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