

Environment

Asbestos: the killer is forgotten

By TONI COCCO

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SOQUEL — When asbestos poisoning became a national issue a few years ago, the focus was on the increasing death rate of people exposed to the fibers in manufacturing during World War II.

Now, the public is being misled into thinking that the problem is being erased — that big daddy is taking the danger out of their lives, and the workers whose health has been ruined are being compensated, says Jim Vermeulen.

Not so. In fact, Vermeulen's very personal contact with the disease caused by asbestos — he is slowly dying from asbestosis — has prompted him to concern himself with the millions of people still exposed to asbestos.

The manufacturing of asbestos products still continues today and those products still are being installed in homes, schools and businesses across the nation.

Millions of people are inhaling asbestos every day and don't even know it, says Vermeulen.

Manufacturers who say modern construction can't continue on the upward swing without it, he says, are lying.

There are many substitutes for asbestos in modern manufacturing, he says, producing a list of 58 companies in the U.S. who manufacture with asbestos substitutes.

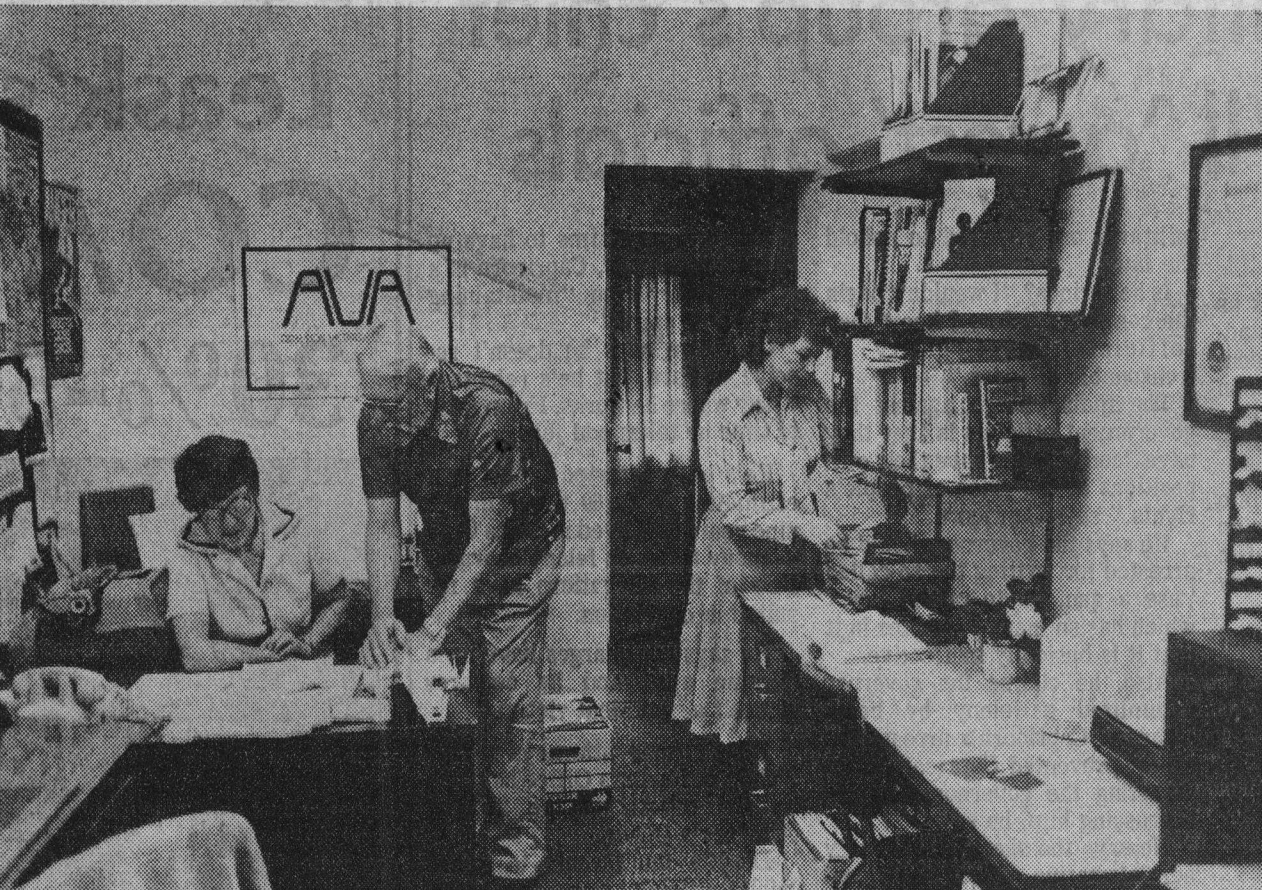
Asbestos products Vermeulen says people should be concerned with are: roofing, thermal insulation, cement sheet used in fire walls and in soundproofing, brake drums for cars and trucks, protective clothing, electrical insulation, paints, Blankets, yarn, walls, and ceilings.

Abrasion can cause asbestos dust to linger in the air around these products indefinitely until inhaled, he says.

Some of the substitutes for asbestos are: plastic, fiberglass, aluminum, polypropylene and polyurethane.

He quotes a recent labor Department study that states 676,000 Americans will develop asbestos-caused lung cancer by the year 2000.

To illustrate these recent statistics, he suggests that when a DC-10 jet



Pete Amos/Sentinel

Ellie Nielsen, Jim Vermeulen and Holli Patterson in AVA office.

crashes, it attracts the attention of the whole world. The statistics on asbestos-related deaths projected by the year 2000, he said, is the equivalent of crashing two fully-loaded DC-10's every week for the next 27 years.

Vermeulen's long-range goal is to have asbestos products banned.

The company where he contracted asbestosis in 1977, Johns-Manville in Stockton, is the largest manufacturer of asbestos in the country.

The company is faced with millions of dollars in lawsuits, and, Vermeulen says, they have chosen to protect profits and file for bankruptcy. He says while the bankruptcy is pending, the company is expanding operations abroad. He follows the company's financial reports in the Wall Street Journal.

"If we allow this bankruptcy (Johns-Manville) to go through," he claims, "we are awarding Carte Blanche to any company who wants to kill people in the name of manufacturing — who introduces a killer into our environment in the name of profit."

Vermeulen is bringing all this in-

formation, and more, to the public on the Donahue Show, tapped in Chicago at the end of March.

Appearing on the show will be a representative from the Johns-Manville Company.

It will air locally on Channel 2 April 22, and on Channel 8 on May 13. It is being shown in the Los Angeles area today.

Vermeulen says he has been avoiding national television because he realizes the response of concerned citizens will be tremendous.

At his Asbestos Victims of America offices in Soquel, he says he already has a tremendous mailing list that has developed through news coverage and speaking engagements.

He anticipates receiving hundreds of letters from people all over the U.S. in response to the Donahue Show broadcast, and his three-person office in downtown Soquel is calling for office volunteers to help organize and mail the extensive literature he has compiled for the public.

He says he wouldn't be conducting a

one-man fight-a-thon with asbestos manufacturers if, after contracting the disease, he were compensated "immediately and adequately."

Although the city of Santa Cruz, and then the county, banned the purchase of asbestos for further construction last June, it still remains, he says, in schools, homes and businesses built before that date.

Six million children a year are exposed to asbestos in the schools. He says an EPA report concludes that 75 to 90 children a year die from exposure to the substance.

Of 100,000 cancer victims, he says, 30,000 don't smoke. "Where do you think they get the cancer?" What he calls "the beneficial big three" the heart, lung and cancer societies, don't appear to be doing much to bring information to the public, he says.

The big statistic, he maintains, is that 27 million people in this country are exposed, occupationally, to asbestos — today — and that 30 percent of their families are projected to die from exposure.