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NEWS

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Media Advisory ASBESTOS--THE PERSISTENT PLAGUE

Boston, Mass.--While some progress has been made in the effort to protect the public from asbestos, there are charges that major educational, financial, judicial and medical institutions are perpetuating a cover-up that began as early as the 1930s, when asbestos manufacturers joined forces to suppress information about the hazards of asbestos exposure. In addition, asbestos manufacturers, who no longer have a fertile American market because of laws requiring the phasing out of asbestos, are accused of promoting the increased use of asbestos in developing countries.

These and other issues will be discussed by some of the nation's leading asbestos experts at a symposium, sponsored by Boston University School of Public Health (BUSPH) and Tufts University, called "Asbestos, the Persistent Plague: The Past, Present and Future of a Public Health Menace," on Friday, March 2, from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. at the George Sherman Union Conference Auditorium, 775 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston. Participants include scientists, environmentalists, victims' rights advocates and an investigative journalist.

The symposium, co-sponsored by the Boston University Art Gallery, coincides with the national debut of "Breath Taken: The Landscape and Biography of Asbestos," an exhibition on view at the Gallery from March 1 through April 8, that chronicles the human tragedy of asbestos exposure. "Breath Taken" is a mixed-media exhibition that includes more than 100 photographs by Boston photographer Bill Ravanese, whose father died of asbestos-related disease, and a selection of vintage photographs.

"The symposium and the photographs and artifacts in the exhibition are about the human face of the asbestos 'problem,'" says conference organizer David Ozonoff, M.D., M.P.H., the chief of the Environmental Health Section at

BUSPH. "It reminds us that it is people and what happened to them, as well as what can still happen to others, that is at the essence of the problem, not economics, the convenience of the courts, or the philosophical leanings of various administrations and their regulatory agencies."

Asbestos, a durable substance that has more than 3,000 uses, has been used commercially for more than a 100 years. Risks associated with asbestos exposure were suspected as early as 1924, yet asbestos insulation, a major use of the substance, was not banned until 1972. It is estimated that 20 million American workers have been exposed to asbestos on the job and that millions more are exposed daily in their homes and public buildings, placing them at higher risk for asbestos-related diseases that can cause disability or death. In 1989, the Environmental Protection Agency enacted regulations banning the use of other asbestos products, which will lead to a gradual phaseout by 1997.

The subject of the symposium has special significance for the Boston area. Close to 2,500 asbestos cases have been pending for years in Boston federal court, yet only 10 have been brought to trial (as of 12/88). Compared with other civil cases, a disproportionate number of asbestos cases have been pending for three or more years. The backlog means plaintiffs wait years for their day in court, and defendants have no incentive to settle.

Paul Brodeur, a senior staff writer for The New Yorker who investigated the asbestos issue, will discuss the status of asbestos cases in Boston federal court. He also will level charges at institutions in the greater Boston area for participating in a continuation of the asbestos cover-up.

Barry Castleman, an environmentalist and researcher specializing in health issues, claims that asbestos manufacturers are responding to a restricted market in this country by promoting the use of asbestos in developing countries that are not often well equipped to deal with its hazards.

James Fite, the executive director of the White Lung Association, a national victims' organization, will discuss the current plight of asbestos victims. Members of his organization will be available for interviews.

Dr. Irving J. Selikoff, a professor emeritus at Mount Sinai Medical Center in New York, will deliver the keynote address. Involved in some of the most significant epidemiological studies on asbestos, Selikoff will discuss the new problems emerging with respect to asbestos, such as the growth in the kinds of people developing asbestos-related diseases from those who manufactured or used the material to those who are exposed to it in the general environment.

Members of the media are invited to both the symposium and the exhibition.