



ASBESTOS SHIRT IS A TOXIC NEW WRINKLE IN WTC WOE

By LINDA STASI and SUSAN EDELMAN

April 9, 2006 -- Sky-high toxic levels of potentially deadly asbestos still cling to the fibers of this ordinary white dress shirt - worn by a 9/11 volunteer for two days at Ground Zero, a shocking analysis sought by The Post reveals.

Community liaison Yehuda Kaploun volunteered at Ground Zero for 48 hours immediately after the attack, wearing the shirt as he watched good friend and beloved Fire Department chaplain Mychal Judge die in a building collapse.

The volunteer kept his contaminated shirt packed in a sealed plastic bag until last week, when The Post sent the garment to RJ Lee Group laboratories for testing.

Analyzed portions of his shirt collar reveal a chilling concentration of chrysotile asbestos - 93,000 times higher than the average typically found in the environment in U.S. cities. That appears to be even higher than what the EPA said was found in the most contaminated, blown-out building after 9/11.

While there appear to be no specific regulations for asbestos levels on clothing, one lawyer for relief workers called the sickly shirt's amount "astronomically toxic."

It's the "high end of surface concentrations that you would find anywhere," added Chuck Kraisinger, a senior scientist for RJ Lee.

Testing also revealed the shirt was contaminated with zinc, mercury, antimony, barium, chromium, cobalt, copper, lead and molybdenum. Tons of the heavy metals were pulverized and burned in the debris in fires that raged for four months.

The test results are especially frightening in light of last week's report by the Centers for Disease Control that 62 percent of those caught in the massive dust cloud suffered respiratory problems. Also, 46 percent of civilians living or working in the immediate area but not caught in the cloud still experienced respiratory problems - and 57 percent reported new and worsening respiratory symptoms.

Making matters worse, Dr. Mark Rosen, chief of the Division of Pulmonary and Critical Care Medicine at Beth Israel Hospital, said that because it can take decades for asbestos cancers to develop, "We just won't know the effect [of Ground Zero exposure] for years."

About 400,000 tons of asbestos were released in the World Trade Center collapse. David Worby, a lawyer for 7,300 rescue and recovery workers who inhaled the smoke and dust at Ground Zero for months, called the area "the worst toxic site ever."

"It's mind-boggling the poisons they made these people work through," Worby said. "The amount of dioxins there make Vietnam look like a kindergarten."

"It is an urgent situation. If the government does not act . . . in terms of setting up [widespread] medical testing . . . more people over the next few years will die of toxic diseases than died on 9/11."

According to the Mesothelioma Resource Center, "Asbestos becomes dangerous when it breaks into pieces small enough to enter deep into the lungs. The longer period of time that a person is exposed to asbestos fibers, the higher the risk of developing lung disease later in life."

The most common types of diseases caused by asbestos exposure, according to the center, are mesothelioma, either benign or malignant, cancer and asbestosis.

On 9/11, Kaploun was a 35-year-old liaison between the Police and Fire departments and the Orthodox Jewish community, as well as a part-time Hatzolah Ambulance volunteer. He said he doesn't really know why he tucked the shirt away two days after the terror attacks.

"But something told me that it was loaded with stuff - and it goes to show you how very wrong these people were whom we trusted," he said.

"I remember coming home, and you know what, I was going to give the shirt to the cleaners, and then somehow, for some reason, I didn't.

"But if my shirt and I can do something to help these people who were there for weeks and months on end - and if this is the kind of numbers needed that will help and support their cases - then that's the blessing."

He said he is "somewhat" concerned about his own health in the future.

"But so far, thank God, everything is good," he said. "I've been checked and I check out OK - but I only hope the government will do the right thing for all the people who were there for an extended period of time.

"I was with government officials and we saw thousands of people covered in this soot, and while we were assured that preliminarily there was no danger, obviously this is not the case."

Kaploun was there the first day of the attacks with Judge, who perished in the collapse in front of Kaploun's eyes.

"Father Judge always said to me, the son of a rabbi, 'When you're a member of the clergy you have to have an easy smile.' And he always did. He was a good man."

Although Kaploun may have saved his shirt in honor of the heroic efforts he saw that day, he hopes it may ultimately turn out to be the very thing that will help other 9/11 volunteers get help for illnesses they develop in the future.

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