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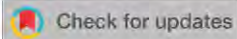
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Biblioteca richiedente: Biblioteca Istituto Nazionale di Ricerca Metrologica - Torino
Data richiesta: 16/09/2021 14:57:09
Biblioteca fornitrice: Biblioteca di Scienze - Como Università degli Studi dell'Insubria
Data evasione: 16/09/2021 15:29:10

Titolo rivista/libro: BMJ. British medical journal
Titolo articolo/sezione: Obituaries: Morris Greenberg: occupational health specialist on a lifelong quest to make the world asbestos free
Autore/i: Illman John
ISSN: 1756-1833
DOI: 10.1136/bmj.n2265
Anno: 2021
Volume: 374
Fascicolo: 2265
Editore:
Pag. iniziale: 1
Pag. finale: 2



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Cite this as: *BMJ* 2021;374:n2265

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n2265>

Published: 15 September 2021

Morris Greenberg: occupational health specialist on a lifelong quest to make the world asbestos free

John Illman



In 1967 a young doctor, Morris Greenberg, noted that every surface in a London factory was covered in white asbestos dust. Workers without face masks were brushing the floor, churning up clouds of the so called “magic mineral,” unaware of the danger, even though one man was struggling to breathe. Ironically, he complained that his mask impeded his breathing.

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Marking a turning point in Greenberg’s career, the Bermondsey visit fired his lifelong quest to make the world asbestos free, despite persistent government prevarication and formidable industrial opposition. Asbestos took Greenberg into a murky world of scientific deceit and political collusion, where victims of asbestosis and related diseases died in destitution while their bosses received honours and riches: asbestos was as wealth promoting as it was life threatening.

Greenberg was later acclaimed as one of the giants of occupational health, although he was feted more outside the UK than within it. He was also branded—a distinguished honour in itself—as a major trouble maker by the UK asbestos industry.

Formidable adversaries included Ralph Bateman (1910-96), former president of the Confederation of British Industry and chairman of Turner and Newall, which at one time ran the world’s largest asbestos factory. Bateman considered that asbestos could be sold “safely” in developing countries, where life

expectancy was so low that people would die from other causes before developing asbestos related diseases. Asbestos related cancers can occur up to 50 years after exposure.

Turner and Newall persuaded government officials to restrict asbestos regulations and safety inspections before Greenberg helped to establish new national standards for the industry and the national asbestos survey into the health of asbestos workers.

But he became disenchanted with occupational health in the UK. Asbestos was not totally banned in Britain until 1999, even though the first reports of severe and fatal respiratory disease in asbestos factory workers had appeared in the UK in 1898, in France in 1906, and in Italy in 1908. In 2015 the UK was reported to be the only major country in Europe that did not have a legal requirement to provide occupational health services by the state or employers.

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The youngest of six children of Ukrainian immigrants brought up in the East End of London, young Morris was encouraged to study by his father, who learnt English by reading the novels of Sir Walter Scott. Morris was severely handicapped early in life, firstly by two severe bouts of diphtheria, and then, as a medical student, by tuberculosis (TB). Infected at a postmortem examination, he is believed to have been the first Briton to receive streptomycin, the first effective cure for TB. The antibiotic was shipped

specifically for him from the US. His urine was distilled to provide streptomycin for other patients.

Even though the streptomycin was successful, Greenberg had to convalesce for nearly four years before resuming medical school. His was no ordinary rehabilitation. While in the King Edward V11 Sanatorium in Midhurst, in 1946, he created and edited from his bed *The Edwardian* magazine, his first publication.

Advised that the south coast, the “Riviera of England”—as described by Southern Rail—may speed his recovery he enrolled at the Hastings School of Art. In another life he could have been a painter. One of his paintings, a stormy sea under dark clouds, mocks the vision of an English Riviera.

On returning to medical school at University College Hospital, London, in 1950, Greenberg edited two editions of the hospital student magazine and, for the first of many times in his life, courted controversy.

His wife, Gillian Greenberg, a retired epidemiologist who worked for the Medical Research Council, recalled: “He could have ended his career when he chose to defend the freedom of the press to publish an article not all in keeping with the with the establishment’s views. Thanks to the support of a consultant whose own religious community had a history of fighting for liberty, he kept his place at medical school, but it was a near thing.”

In 1957, as a houseman, Greenberg published his first medical paper, “Accidental Digoxin Poisoning in a Child of Two Years,” in *Archives of Disease in Childhood*. Written in view of the “rarity” of such reports, it was followed by hundreds more, mostly about asbestos and related topics. (He was at his most prolific in retirement, writing until the day he died, routinely starting at 7 30 am.)

Greenberg was a company doctor for Philips Electrical between 1959 and 1967. His career transforming visit to Bermondsey in 1967 came in the first of his 17 years as senior adviser to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). After founding and running the HSE’s statistical and epidemiology unit, he moved to the Department of Health in 1985. Four years later he began a four year stint as a visiting professor at New York City University, enhancing his global reputation as a leader in occupational health.

His many international honours include the Ramazzini award he won in 2011 for more than 50 years of “dedicating himself to health, safety, and wellbeing in workers.” The Collegium Ramazzini was founded in memory of Bernadino Ramazzini, the Italian doctor credited with establishing occupational health as a specialty. Greenberg was a founder member of the collegium in 1982.

A quiet, modest, well mannered man, Greenberg was exceptionally calm and measured. His wife, Gillian, who survives him, says that she heard him swear only once in 60 years. His daughter, Naomi, a chemistry teacher, says that she saw him cross only once. She and her siblings, Daniel, a legislative draughtsman, and Kahtan, an occupational physician, also survive him.

Greenberg and Gillian met only three times before they became engaged and married in 1961. An avid reader, Greenberg was said to devour anything readable—even a random selection of letters from a Scrabble bag. His favourite authors included Trollope and Thackeray, two British authors renowned for their satirical playfulness. He also had a playful sense of humour and an encyclopaedic memory of quotes. The former chief rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, said that Greenberg had all the erudition to write a dozen encyclopaedias and “all the modesty to keep us from knowing it.”

He did not fulfil his ambition to see an asbestos-free world, but he helped to reduce the scale of the tragedy. Asbestos remains the biggest single cause of work related deaths in the UK—and the world. The HSE estimates that asbestos-related diseases kill about 4500 people a year.

Morris Greenberg (b 1926; q London 1953; FRCP, FFOM), died from respiratory distress on 19 August 2021