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Jody

Asbestos in Player Piano Suction Turbine

By [Mark Kinsler](#)

> My question is, what obligation is the player repairman under if he
> services a piano with this material in the vacuum pump, or has to
> service the motor itself? As hot air is passing over this material and
> then is exhausted into the air, how great is the chance of fibers being
> discharged into the room?

>

> I have that dilemma now, and have decided to replace it with a modern
> fireproofing substitute, a thin fiberglass mat. Other opinions?

Yours is a very good question. I have little knowledge of mechanical music restorations. I thus have vast respect for the people who can repair these wonderful devices. But I do have some background in safety matters and the pseudo-science that's driving many of the current hazardous-material lawsuits, so perhaps my opinion will be of some use.

If the asbestos sheet isn't deteriorating, I'd leave it alone. If it is deteriorating, replace it with something that'll maintain the electrical/heat insulating qualities necessary for motor protection.

However, I'd suggest that you make your decision based on the following facts:

* The current flap over asbestos is mostly bogus. Someone who works in an asbestos mine or with fireproofing compounds containing the stuff is advised to be careful, but asbestos is not arsenic. Juries can be convinced of almost anything, but it's best to start with the truth.

* You've asked, 'what are the chances' of asbestos fibers being discharged into the room. Answer: probably 100% But what you're really asking is, 'can this vacuum motor discharge a harmful amount of asbestos fibers into the lungs of my customer?' I'd say that the answer is no. (It might also be noted that the chances of your customer dying at some point are 100%)

* As for the fiberglass mat, there's some suspicion -- at least as valid as the rather odd scientific work done on asbestos -- that glass fibers might be as harmful as asbestos fibers. Neither is so swell to breathe, though they're both far less harmful than dust from poultry production, flour in commercial bakeries, cotton fibers from textile mills (the disease is known as 'brown lung,') or coal dust (from which we get 'black lung' disease.)

If the suspicious material seems to be as intact as, say, a piece of soft cardboard or blotting paper, I'd leave it alone and draw no further attention to it.

It's possible that there are other bits of asbestos in the machine, and there's certainly other celebrated materials like lead tubing, lead-based solder, and mold spores in there too.

Having said all that, you'll have to decide how likely it is that someone is planning to check the motor in a player piano for the presence of asbestos.

And that's the crux of the situation. Anyone who repairs or sells old stuff (or new stuff, depending on what some charlatan comes up with for the next Evening News) must be concerned with the possible presence of possibly harmful substances in possibly harmful concentrations that could possibly harm someone using the device in a normal manner.

I suppose you could also be sued for bringing a piano into someone's house and having it crash through an inadequate floor. My guess is that there are far greater issues for a mechanical music restorer to worry about.

Mark Kinsler

(Message sent Mon 2 Dec 2002, 04:08:56 GMT, from time zone GMT-0500.)

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