

# LETTERS

EDITOR: ROY COOK, 429-5220; FAX 498-5677; E-MAIL [letters@thejournal.canwest.com](mailto:letters@thejournal.canwest.com)

## Selling asbestos

We are not surprised that the Quebec chrysotile asbestos industry has responded in the way it has ("Quebec's chrysotile industry defends asbestos mining, export," Letters, May 5) to our Ideas column ("Canada's double standard on asbestos: Government says known carcinogen is too risky for use in Canada, but that doesn't prevent it from pushing chrysotile sales abroad," April 26).

It argues in bad faith by denying the harm of chrysotile asbestos, and by impugning us for so doing.

Like the death merchants in tobacco, who for many decades worked to hide the hazards of tobacco and now make up for lost profits by selling massively to emerging economy countries, the asbestos industry will try to expand its market wherever possible.

While it is the role of industry to promote its product, it is not our government's role to do so.

Who is naive enough to believe that asbestos workers in such countries as Canada's leading export market — India — are adequately protected from asbestos fibres? Go to any construction site there where asbestos-cement sheets are sawn and watch the dust being inhaled.

We interpret the science on asbestos just like numerous health agencies and countries do, particularly the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) which designated chrysotile asbestos as a definitive human carcinogen in 1977. More recently, the European Commission banned all forms of asbestos as a requirement for membership.

Despite this, Quebec's asbestos industry has received more than \$50 million in tax dollars to promote asbestos globally.

Do not be misled by the "different forms of asbestos argument." In fact, the main substitute fibres have been judged clearly less dangerous than chrysotile asbestos, though monitoring of their health effects continues.

We call for responsible government action to stop Canada's collaboration with the Quebec asbestos industry. It is the role of public health professionals to defend the public health interest over all others. Let the public decide whose argument they trust.

*Colin L. Soskolne, department of public health sciences, University of Alberta, and David V. Bates, MD, professor emeritus, University of British Columbia*