

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

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Many of us are aware of asbestos remediation programs in schools, offices and public buildings. These programs are designed to safely remove asbestos, formerly used in the construction of buildings, because of its proven link to cancer and lung disease.

The inconvenience associated with remediation efforts is regarded as necessary to protect people's health, especially the health of younger people. Exposure today can result in cancers and lung diseases several decades later.

This inconvenience to Canadians pales, however, in contrast to the hardship experienced by people who buy chrysotile asbestos from us and thereby continue to risk illness and premature death.

As a beacon of civilization, should Canada be concerned with such matters?

How immoral it is that Canadians are involved in pushing a product, no longer considered safe in Canada, to countries less advanced in protecting public health.

Clearly, we should be disgusted that our federal government is complicit in concealing the harm from asbestos in exporting it. Given that the asbestos fibre type from Quebec — known as chrysotile — poses a cancer risk to humans, we certainly should not be permitting its extraction and worldwide distribution.

Yet, our government is directly engaged in mining, marketing and exporting chrysotile asbestos products abroad, to countries without our institutionalized awareness of the harms caused by asbestos.

Big business in Quebec

The province of Quebec, rich in asbestos reserves, remains the world's

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fourth largest producer of chrysotile asbestos. Quebec's political influence with the federal government is exploited by chrysotile stakeholders for economic advantage. Stakeholders promote the product through deception, aided and abetted by academics, paid handsomely to downplay the health hazards, both locally and abroad. Spurred on by the interests of asbestos shareholders, the pro-asbestos propaganda ignores both the social and health consequences of chrysotile asbestos.

Last month, a chrysotile asbestos marketing and promotion exercise took place in Indonesia. There, the asbestos lobby, supported by its pet scientists, argued ad nauseum at an “international scientific symposium” that the new and improved, name-sanitized “chrysotile” is safe for use in Indonesia. This exercise was sanctioned by the Canadian government. Canada provided its logo, embassy, and our tax dollars to perpetuate a lie about a toxic product we will not use here, but that we export, harming the health and well-being of people abroad.

The government of Canada produced

a colourful program announcement.

Speakers included Clement Godbout, chairman of the International Chrysotile Institute (the new asbestos-free name of the Quebec-based Asbestos Institute); some Canadian government mines official (from Quebec); a representative of the Russian asbestos industry, Dr. Ericson Bagatin, who works closely with the Brazilian asbestos lobby; an Indonesian asbestos industry person, and perennial asbestos industry-paid consultants, Drs. David Bernstein and John Hoskins. The program was rounded off by selected Indonesian bureaucrats.

In an impressive-looking invitation, issued under the auspices of the Canadian embassy, anyone who had any questions or conscience at the end of this affair was welcomed to a networking cocktail party.

A one-sided gathering

Notably absent was Dr. Zulmiar Yanri, head of the occupational safety and health centre for Indonesia. Also missing was Dr. Douglas Henderson, an Australian pathologist whose appointment and expertise were instrumental in the decision to dismiss Canada's case against the French asbestos ban at the World Trade Organization a few years ago. The reason for Yanri's absence was that she had wanted to bring Henderson's objectivity to this otherwise biased event. And, when her suggestion was rejected by the sponsors, she expressed her solidarity to the cause of public health by not attending.

This is but one example of pro-asbestos bias operating at the highest levels of our government. There are many more examples from India and Brazil, Mexico and Chile.

Since the French government maintained its national ban on asbestos, the scientific evidence of the danger from low-intensity exposure to asbestos has



THE CANADIAN PRESS, FILE

The Johns-Manville open asbestos pit mining operation in Asbestos, Que.

been reinforced. Indeed, there is every reason to link chrysotile asbestos exposure to a variety of lung cancers and other lung disease risks. With increasing global concern regarding asbestos, the government of Canada has become a pariah for its active support of this hazardous industry.

Government of Canada support for the Quebec asbestos industry has deep roots. The simple reality is that the federal government supports the Quebec asbestos mining industry presumably for political gains.

Concerned scientists and citizens need to unify to shut down an industry that has caused death and destruction at home and abroad. We need to acknowledge that, by selling chrysotile asbestos, Canada is engaged in a duplicitous act based on a double standard: chrysotile asbestos is not safe enough for Canadi-

an use, yet it is safe enough for Indonesians and others outside of our borders!

By not condemning our government's support of the chrysotile asbestos industry, Canadians become complicit in both harming and killing innocent victims abroad. Canada must join the dozens of countries in Europe, Latin America, Asia and Africa that have banned asbestos.

In May, our government is supporting yet another feel-good international conference on chrysotile asbestos, this time in Montreal. When will its collaboration with the asbestos industry cease?

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