



Occupational Health
Clinics for Ontario
Workers Inc.

Centres de santé
des travailleurs (ses)
de l'Ontario Inc.

Canadian Asbestos: A Global Concern

Ottawa, Ontario

September 12, 2003

I want to take this opportunity to thank the organizers of this tremendous conference and for the invitation to speak to the issue of *“Repercussions of Asbestos Use in Canada”*.

Asbestos has a long dark history in this country... a history that governments, (provincial and federal), industry and insurance companies continued to cover-up, ignore or deny.

- As early as 1918 the Canadian and American Insurance industry began to refuse life insurance to asbestos miners;
- In 1930 Johns Manville executives in Scarborough, Ontario were already aware that “signs of asbestosis” had appeared in over half of their textile workers, the majority of whom were women, but they said nothing.
- In 1935, senior officials of the two largest asbestos firms exchanged letters agreeing “our interests are best served by having asbestosis receive the minimum of publicity”.
- In 1949 Manville physicians x-rayed 708 miners at the Jeffrey mine in Québec. They found only 4 miners with normal lungs. They left without informing anyone of their findings.
- This continued right into the 1960s when American government hearings revealed a massive industry conspiracy with governmental participation.
- People may believe that asbestos related disease is an historical relic that harmed workers and communities in the past. However, recent scientific estimates demonstrate that we are carrying the legacy of industry and government negligence and indifference well into the 21st century. It is projected that over 1 million asbestos deaths will occur in Europe over the next 35 years, including 250,000 cases of mesothelioma. You know, I can talk to you about statistics in Europe or in the U.S. but I can't talk to you about statistics in Canada because we do not have a registry. That is one point, which I'll come back to later.
- The legacy of asbestos in Canada can be viewed from the experience of thousands of workers and their families in communities across the province and across the country. It is ironic that the federal government would spend 1 billion dollars to remove the asbestos in the very building we are situated in, the parliament buildings, while it uses the World Trade Organization to stop the European ban on the importation and use of asbestos. It seems heartless and crass that Ottawa would use its diplomatic muscle to stop countries like Chile and Brazil from banning asbestos while the Ontario Workplace Safety and Insurance Board pays out over 14 million dollars in compensation, so far, to former workers and their families in Sarnia Ontario.
- There are people who wonder whether the only difference between land mines and asbestos mines is what Canada exports. While Canada played such a pivotal and positive role in pushing the land mine ban, what they are doing with asbestos in the words of Dr. Castelmann is a national disgrace.

Let me briefly explain the role of the Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers and how our own

history is linked to the history of the asbestos issue and why we still see exposures occurring.

The Clinics, of which there are currently 6 clinics in Ontario, were borne out of organized labour's need for independent, reliable, expert occupational health advice for working people. We are totally funded by the provinces' Workplace Safety and Insurance Board. We offer a range of services to workers and the workplace parties including assessment and diagnosis of work related injuries and illnesses; workplace interventions to reduce and/or eliminate the hazards at the source; answering inquiries on occupational health and conducting research into occupational health.

Our database statistics demonstrate that over the last three years, the number 1 exposure agent of all cases coming through the clinics is related to asbestos. Not RSI or WMSDs that workers are reporting, but asbestos related diseases – lung cancers, asbestosis, kidney and gastrointestinal cancers, and mesothelioma.

While you heard from Jim Brophy, Margaret Keith and others on the occupational and environmental catastrophe that occurred in Sarnia, it is the construction and building trades, building maintenance and shipyard workers coming in to our clinics who are bearing the highest risk today. Skilled trades workers, like the pipe fitters tell us that after 25 years of encapsulation of asbestos, it is now becoming friable and they continue to be exposed to asbestos when they are in retrofitting or repairing in buildings and therefore exposing office workers, or hospital workers to the asbestos. They have often wondered whether they should be reporting to the unaware workers their exposure.

You may have heard yesterday about the wife of a former Holmes Foundry worker who is herself suffering from asbestosis because of the asbestos her husband brought home on his clothes. We have a worker who delivered milk to the Holmes Foundry plant who now has asbestosis. We have a well-publicized case of a 14 year-old son who died of mesothelioma. The father worked at Holmes. We currently have 82 bystander cases at the Sarnia Clinic.

The Building Trades unions, especially the asbestos insulators have played a key role in exposing asbestos related diseases burden being borne by workers.

The asbestos industry had a long history of denying access to the health records of its employees to independent scientists.

The International Association of Heat and Frost Asbestos Insulators broke the monopoly of information held by the industry when they turned over their pension records and American and Canadian members beginning in the 1960s to Dr. Selikoff and his colleagues at Mt. Sinai Medical Centre in New York. The union's actions exposed the enormous governmental and industry concocted cover-up which was so severe that asbestos related litigation is now the single biggest issue in front of the American judicial system.

In Toronto, Building Trades Workers have taken many public stands by shutting down worksites where they knew there was asbestos exposure. But there continues today a lingering health crisis.

One of the agency partners that OHCOW provides funding to is the Windsor Occupational Health Information Service. Every year a banquet is held in memory of Clifton Grant, a carpenter, who worked at the Scarborough Ontario School Board. As a carpenter, one of his duties was to cut acoustical ceiling tiles, which contained asbestos. Clifton Grant died from mesothelioma. He was 37 years old. Clifton Grant had no warning about the dangers of asbestos that he faced. His spouse and family were not aware that his life might be in danger because of the hazards he faced at work.

In Canada, there is NO central registry of asbestos cases as there is in other countries and therefore no predications can be made on the problem that we are facing. As a result, the diseased remain invisible. Because the workers are invisible there is no research being conducted into asbestos related diseases nor action taken to prevent exposures. We need to demand that a national registry be created.

Buzz Hargrove a great Canadian union leader President of the Canadian Auto Workers said in a statement in 2001 that he recognizes the significance of the jobs at stake in the Quebec asbestos mines. But this cannot be the basis for promoting a deadly product that will result in loss of life in countries around the world. There are less than 2000 workers in this industry. Why not pension off these workers and provide them with meaningful support, re-training and job placements.

The First step towards resolving a problem is recognition of the problem. For the last 85 years we Canadians have either ignored, denied or indeed tried to sweep the problem under the carpet. We at the Clinics recognize more than anyone else how serious the problem is and that the time has finally come to do something about it.

Let's set up a central registry of asbestos cases. Let's take care of the workers involved in the industry and then let's do the right thing and ban asbestos.