

The debate on banning asbestos

I write concerning the package of articles in *CMAJ* on the call for a ban on asbestos.¹⁻³ A few years ago I wrote to the Canadian and Quebec governments suggesting that asbestos should be exported only to countries that could ensure that asbestos was handled with the same precautions that were legislated in Canada. Some form of supervision by independent experts, excluding all apologists and activists, would be required. My proposal did not receive support; I was told that it was not practical, that it represented interference with foreign countries, and that other exporters would rush to fill the void.

However, I feel that in the absence of assurances concerning the handling of asbestos in receiving countries, there is a clear moral choice to make. The same issues should concern those who profit from the export of pesticides.

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Time after time, I have been amazed by those who rush to the defence of the chrysotile industry. A *CMAJ* editorial supported the suggestion that a panel of experts review the public health implications of asbestos and the efficacy and the hazards of alternative materials.¹

In 1998 a panel of 17 experts from 10 countries, which drew on the resources of 140 collaborating centres,

institutions and individuals in developed and developing countries, concluded that "exposure to chrysotile asbestos poses increased risks for asbestosis, lung cancer and mesothelioma in a dose-dependent manner. No threshold has been identified for carcinogenic risks. Where safer substitute materials for chrysotile are available, they should be considered for use. Some asbestos-containing products pose particular concern and chrysotile use in these circumstances is not recommended."

Is this World Health Organization panel of experts not expert enough? The evidence is clear. Chrysotile has caused and is continuing to cause disease and death worldwide. It is hypocritical for Canada to continue to produce chrysotile when it is not prepared to use it domestically. If chrysotile is unsuitable for Canadian lungs, how does it become suitable for Korean, Indian and Japanese lungs?

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The data now seem to clearly refute certain old ideas about asbestos, including the notions that lung cancer cannot occur without obvious interstitial fibrosis on chest film, that chrysotile does not cause lung cancer and that there is no real interaction between smoking and asbestos exposure except among insulation workers. As a consequence of these old beliefs, claims from smokers who were exposed to asbestos and developed lung cancer have been denied for years by workers' compensation boards, often on the grounds that smoking represented the greater

risk. However, a smoker exposed to asbestos is more than twice as likely as a smoker who was not exposed to asbestos to die of lung cancer (whether there is a synergistic effect at that level of exposure or not), a conclusion supported by the totality of the literature and individual studies of chrysotile-exposed workers in which the data have been so analyzed.¹ Thus, if one looked at a population of smoking asbestos workers who developed lung cancer and compared them only with unexposed smokers who developed the disease, one would conclude that occupational exposure was the cause of more than half of the cases; this is the presumptive criterion for an occupational disease. A strong case could be made that the risk conferred by exposure to asbestos for a smoking worker should be compared with the background risk for other smokers, not nonsmokers. By that standard, many claims now denied would be accepted.

Asbestos is an example of a health problem concerning which attitudes are changing, although I could as easily use asbestos as an example of how slow they are to change. In developing countries, chrysotile is no longer being defended as harmless. Instead, it is being defended as having an acceptable cost/risk ratio: asbestos will be handled with exquisite care by well-trained workers in the production of cement pipe that will provide clean water, which will save innumerable lives. Excuse me if I, and the rest of the world, do not buy this argument. The time has come for Canada to accept the inevitable global ban on exports of asbestos.²

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