

Frank A, on behalf of the Collegium Ramazzini. A call for an international ban on asbestos [editorial]. *CMAJ* 2001;164(4):489-90.

The proposal to ban asbestos<sup>1</sup> is based on arguments that neglect certain facts. Although I agree that the dusty asbestos workplaces that existed for 7 or more decades resulted in excessive exposure and undoubtedly caused malignancies, current industry regulations have dramatically improved workplace conditions. Anxieties about asbestos were initiated and then amplified by the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) beginning in the 1970s and continuing well into the 1980s. At one point the EPA estimated that 100 to 8000 schoolchildren would die prematurely because of exposure to asbestos in school building materials. Without evidence, the EPA came to believe, at one point, that a single asbestos fibre could cause cancer. Such claims generated enormous media attention and caused public panic. In 1990, EPA Director W.K. Reilly admitted, “[We] must accept a share of the responsibility for the misperceptions that led to the unwarranted anxiety and unnecessary asbestos removal.”<sup>2</sup> This statement, however, received little attention.

These facts are obfuscated or ignored by ban-the-asbestos advocates; in the past, balanced presentations about this issue<sup>3,4</sup> have had little or no impact on legislators and international trade regulators. If the arguments for a ban on asbestos<sup>1</sup> are accepted, can a call for a ban on gravel, a crushed rock that may contain up to 90% silica, be far behind because of the risk of silicosis from its dust?

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Although there is much that could be said concerning the Collegium Ramazzini's exaggerations of the haz-

ards of asbestos,<sup>1</sup> the most significant matter to be rebutted is the statement in the penultimate paragraph that indicates that the Collegium Ramazzini receives no support from trial lawyers. This may be true now, but it was not the case in 1991. The plaintiffs' executive committee in the School Asbestos Litigation case provided a cheque for US\$50 000 (from the settlement fund) to the late Irwin J. Selikoff, the founder of the Collegium, to pay, in part, for a conference on the dangers of asbestos (the “Third Wave Conference”) convened by the Collegium and attended by 15 US judges, several of whom had been handling asbestos matters.<sup>2</sup> A further US\$22 500 came from private donations, including donations from members of the plaintiffs' executive committee.<sup>3</sup>

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One can identify 3 stages in the regulation of major health hazards: a total ban, like a taboo in primitive societies; a forced reduction in the production of the hazardous substance to a level often just short of that which would bankrupt the industry, such as the “best available control technology” of the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA); and a thoughtful risk-benefit analysis including comparative risk assessment.

A ban may well be the first approach to a very serious hazard. When a total ban is perceived as disruptive to society's overall goals, “best available control technology” might be the first approach. But when time is available,

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