

Introduction: One Hundred Years of Neglect

by Laurie Kazan-Allen



In 1899, a 33 year-old patient was admitted to a London hospital suffering from breathlessness; within 14 months he was dead. He had been the last survivor of a 10-man team which had worked in the carding room of an asbestos textile factory. The case of the unnamed patient, reported by Dr. Montague Murray to the British Parliament in 1906, was the first asbestos-related death to be officially documented; confirmation of the human health hazard posed by asbestos followed from France (1906), Italy (1908), Britain (1910) and America (1918). And yet, a hundred years after European governments learned of this hazard, asbestos use is increasing in some Asian countries.

Until relatively recently, widespread access to information on the use of asbestos in Asia had been minimal; initially due to a dearth of data and latterly to the lack of translated material. Landmark events which took place in Japan and Thailand in 2004 and 2006 ended this information deficit; presentations by medical researchers, epidemiologists, engineers and other eminent specialists revealed a wealth of detail on the consequences of regional consumption of asbestos and asbestos-containing materials. Related subjects such as the dumping of asbestos-laden end-of-life ships in Asian ship-breaking yards and the work of campaigning groups were also discussed by speakers at the Global Asbestos Congress 2004 and the Asian Asbestos Conference 2006. Combining a close study of these presentations with news of recent developments, the emergence of several trends has been revealed. Increasing communication amongst social partners and feedback from joint initiatives in Asia have also contributed to the information flow; as a result, we are now able to posit explanations as to how and why Asian governments and consumers continue to use a substance which has been denounced by every major scientific organization.

No one knows exactly how many lives have been sacrificed to asbestos. The World Health Organization estimates that today 125 million people are being occupationally exposed to asbestos and that such exposures lead to 90,000 deaths every year.¹ Professor Joe LaDou, Director of the International Center for Occupational Medicine at the University of California, believes that as many as 10 million lives may be lost before asbestos is banned worldwide.² The exploitation of vulnerable populations by asbestos stakeholders greedy for profits and political power takes advantage of loopholes in international regulations which continue to allow trade in carcinogenic substances. Long after regional and national asbestos bans were implemented in much of the developed world, the international agencies responsible for safeguarding occupational and public health remained overwhelmed

by the global propaganda campaign mounted by the asbestos industry. Using commissioned “scientific research” and industry events camouflaged as independent conferences,³ asbestos apologists spread confusion, neutralized criticism and delayed the introduction of regulations to minimize hazardous exposures. Fuelled by political and financial motives, stakeholders preserved lucrative asbestos markets and, by so doing, caused the epidemic of asbestos-related ill-health and death which shows no signs of abating.

When, in 2006, the International Labor Organization and World Health Organization added their support for the campaign to ban asbestos, vested interests ratcheted up their activities. Trade unions from asbestos-cement factories in Russia, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Ukraine founded the Chrysotile International Alliance of Trade Unions to protect the industry against “scientifically unfounded attacks” and counter calls by global labor federations for asbestos to be banned. A letter sent to the WHO’s Director-General by Dr. Jacques Dunningan, former Director for Health and Environment of the Asbestos Institute,⁴ complained that the demonization of chrysotile asbestos was unfair, ill-advised and based on faulty science. A letter to the ILO from the (Canadian) Chrysotile Institute “demanded” a retraction of the ILO’s *Resolution Concerning Asbestos (2006)* claiming that: “**Nowadays, chrysotile is used responsibly and regulated by strict safety standards.**”⁵ The report which follows proves that this statement is untrue.

The mining, import and use of such a deadly substance is as illogical as it is short-sighted; no one is immune to the potential damage posed by this global killer. Current asbestos exposures in Asian countries will lead to higher health costs, lost productivity and increasing mortality from a range of asbestos-related diseases. Incorporating even more asbestos into national infrastructures will only worsen an already deadly situation. Contaminated buildings and transport systems constitute a risk to all who use, work in or maintain them; over time, the presence of asbestos will attract higher maintenance bills as governments mandate stricter regulations for minimizing hazardous exposures. And, in the end, any asbestos used will have to be removed and dumped as hazardous waste, incurring yet more avoidable costs.

The groups which have coalesced to produce *Killing the Future - Asbestos Use in Asia* are determined to protect future generations from the asbestos plague. To this end we have pledged our commitment and willingness to work together to achieve the common goal: an asbestos-free future!