

Reports

16.3 PRELIMINARY CONGRESS REPORT

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Asbestos Diseases Association (Inc) of New Zealand

This Conference was organised mainly by the Brazilian people and International Associates to tell the world of the misery asbestos has brought to Brazil and hear reports from representatives of other countries around the globe who have also had to face the consequences of the use of this material in their country.

After receiving the Organisers' invitation to attend the Conference in Osasco, San Paulo, I accepted and made arrangements to attend. The decision was not taken lightly as it meant two days of air travel both there and back. It was well worth the extra flight time however and the two extra days I gave myself for recuperation and recreation. On September 16, the Conference participants were introduced to the people of Osasco, a somewhat smaller city close to San Paulo.

Those who attended the Conference came from all walks of life. They ranged from international experts in industrial diseases and researchers, to trade unionists and representatives of organisations such as our own. We were all united with the Brazilian people in the true spirit of an international family.

We were introduced to the city and the people of Osasco on Sunday at a meeting organised by the citizens' representatives after having been taken on a short bus trip around a few of the asbestos factories and the living areas of the workforce. From the first we felt very much at home with these friendly people of Brazil.

At 1 p.m. we attended a lunch especially put on for us held in what appeared to be a large and very old barn with a dirt floor and, of course, asbestos cement roofing. The cooking arrangements were primitive but this in no way detracted from the quality of the food.

After lunch we boarded the buses and were taken to a concert in a small stadium and entertained by Brazilian musicians and performers.

We were then taken to a special area guarded by Brazilian and Military Police which we entered by a short corridor. Our group included members of the European and South African Parliaments as well as dignitaries from many countries. The public welcome we were given was overwhelming as we were applauded by the vast crowd of Brazilian citizens.

We were entertained at a Celebratory Concert of Brazilian music performed by Negritude Jr and a social project for children and youth "Familia Negritude and 100% COHAB - TRIBUTE TO ASBESTOS VICTIMS."

The entertainment closed with a display of fireworks which was cut short by a shower of Brazilian rain which could be likened to tears for all asbestos victims. This sent us rushing back to the buses for shelter.

The Conference was opened at 10 a.m on Monday, September 18, by the Mayor of Osasco and one of his colleagues, the Mayor of a small Italian town, along with Peter Skinner, a member of the European Parliament. The Conference organisers spoke briefly and by 11 a.m. we continued

Conference business.

We heard from representatives from the Virgin Islands, the small State of Slovenia, Finland, Denmark, Canada, the Netherlands Belgium, France, Italy, South Africa, Korea, Malaysia, Japan, China, the U.K., U.S.A. and Latin American countries, and Australia, which was represented by two Societies and several academics, etc.

One of the first speakers was Dr Richard Lemen (Former Assistant Surgeon General, United States Public Health Service and President of SOEH (society for Occupational and Environmental Health (USA).

He pointed out in one of his earlier papers published in the American Journal of Industrial Medicine 37 - 236-237 (2000) that only 28.3% of asbestos found in the lung was Chrysotile but it was the major fibre type identified in the mesothelial tissue. Other researchers have also found that Chrysotile is most likely the only asbestos fibre that produces electrolysis (electric charges) which kills red blood cells. So much for the gilt-edged statement so often quoted that Chrysotile is harmless.

The earliest warnings on asbestos use date back almost 2000 years and were written by the Roman historian, Pliny. He also recorded that the weavers who produced the wicks for lamps were supplied with primitive respirators.

The Greek historians as well as the Roman historian, Pliny, recorded that slaves mining Chrysotile asbestos in Cyprus were also supplied with primitive respirators in an attempt to cut down the death toll.

J.L. Abraham, M.D, Professor of Pathology, Director of Environmental and Occupational Pathology, New York, U.S.A. presented an informative and easily understood paper.

He placed special emphasis on the size of asbestos fibres and pointed out that those measured under the ordinary optical microscope were too large and very few of these were found in the lung. These were mainly 0.5 microns in diameter and 10 microns in length. Most fibres found in the lung were less than 0.3 microns in diameter and these could only be seen and measured by an electron microscope. It is apparent that in New Zealand at the present time there is not the skill or equipment available to count these smaller fibres. The emphatic statement from the Professor was "Don't argue and look for excuses, just clean up the asbestos waste.

Gayla Benefield, one of the Conference speakers, told us the history of her beautiful little country town in the mountains of Montana. She wanted us to hear the other side of the story which was not published in the tourist booklet "Welcome to Libby" This booklet failed to mention the Vermiculite Mine some nine miles from the town centre.

This material, Vermiculite, is used as an insulation material mostly in the electrical industry. No one was ever told it was contaminated with Tremolite asbestos.

Then the day came when the consequences started to appear. Now ten per cent of the population are suffering from serious lung diseases and dying one by one from lung cancer and mesothelioma.

Now, at least, there is a surveillance system in place, but it has come too late. Also the tailings and waste from the mines are being returned to where they belong in the old mine shaft. Again, it is all too little, too late.

There are so many stories to be told of individual tragedies not only here, but in so many other countries in the world. One of these can be found in the publication "Clydebank. Asbestos the

unwanted legacy." which describes the tragedy of the use of asbestos and the dumping of asbestos waste along the banks of the River Clyde. I was sceptical about the high mesothelioma rate in this area which is the highest in the world. 212 male cases of mesothelioma per million annually. It was quite a coincidence to find that a Health and Safety Officer from this area was staying in the same hotel and he confirmed this figure. The average male mesothelioma death rate in the U.K. is 19 per million annually.

Another publication "The Magic Mineral to Killer Dust" written by Geoffrey Tweedale, also a Conference speaker. His book contained 313 pages and deals mostly with the British asbestos giant, Turner & Newell.

The greater part of the material in this book comes from papers surrendered at the order of the American Supreme Court and these are available for research in the USA.

The reason for this was Turner & Newell's liabilities for material they supplied to the USA and the manufacturing plants they operated there. Such an order could never have been made anywhere in the U.K.

This book tells in detail the misery caused by the asbestos used in their manufacturing plants and the products they supplied. Readers do not realise the amount of time that goes into research and the writing such a book and the degree of accuracy it requires.

I felt very honoured to have met the author in person and be able to compliment him as well as being able to discuss the contents with him.

The story of the Turner and Newell factory in Armley near Leeds in the U.K. appeared in the daily press. Armley was described as the town with the unusual epidemic of mesothelioma and by 1993 mesothelioma had claimed the lives of 180 citizens.

Some representatives from Leeds attending the Conference confirmed to me that the Council is about to decontaminate the housing estate close to the factory complex.

Another manufacturing firm, Cape Asbestos, caused the same problem and misery in Hebdenbridge, a town in Yorkshire.

This firm was the major supplier of asbestos fibres from the mines operated by them in South Africa. Some of the relatives of the native miners also attended this Conference. This South African mining operation was the cause of disease and death for thousands of their workers.

It took endless negotiation between South Africa and the U.K. over where the responsibility lay to pay compensation to victims. Both the British or South African courts stated this was outside their jurisdiction.

Some three thousand plaintiffs who had claimed compensation from the British firm, Cape Asbestos, and were represented in Britain by Richard Meeran and Sussanah Read of the law firm Leigh Day & Co worked so hard and long for these victims finally took the case to the House of Lords.

On Friday, July 21, 2000, they finally made history. By a remarkable 5:0 majority the House of Lords ruled that the three thousand South African plaintiffs should be permitted to bring claims for compensation against Cape pie, a British company, to the U.K. courts.

The New Zealand situation is very similar to the South African one. Asbestos victims in this country cannot sue overseas employers. The reason for this is that they cannot sue their employers in New Zealand. This ruling also applies to all other cases where overseas companies

or employers operating in this country and causing injury or death to their workers cannot be held responsible and sued for compensation in the New Zealand courts.

This was confirmed in the Putt case by the Australian Federal Court of Appeal. It is now up to the N.Z. Parliament to rectify this unfair ruling and its serious consequences for the N.Z. worker.

The outcome of this Conference was loud and clear. There is no safe level of exposure to asbestos. There never was and is never going to be. The victims and their families are entitled to proper medical aid and treatment as well as adequate financial support by means of compensation.

The participants of the Conference had looked forward to a positive decision by the World Trade Organisation on the total banning of the use of asbestos. They hoped this decision would contribute to an asbestos free world environment. This does not appear to have been favourably decided.

It was heartening to know that the Brazilian people and their Government were proud that they were able to organise and hold this important Conference in their country as after all they had been a major supplier of asbestos and asbestos products to the rest of the world. Osasco was once the main production centre of asbestos containing products. Only some of the ruins of these factories remain and there is a feeling of hope and a better future amongst the people.

Ed Grootegoed attended this Conference on behalf of the many asbestos victims of New Zealand.

Lois Syret
Secretary
October 9,2000