

THE ASBESTOS WAR

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On December 21, 1906, 107 years ago, Parliament was cautioned about the deadly hazard posed by asbestos.¹ This warning went unheeded; over the next 90+ years, Britain embraced asbestos with an almost unrivalled fervour. By the time asbestos was banned (1999), around seven million tonnes of crocidolite, amosite and chrysotile asbestos had been imported.² As a consequence of the failure to take timely and effective action on asbestos, Britain has experienced its worst industrial disaster. By the end of this year (2013), more than 60,000 Britons will have died from asbestos-related diseases this century. Since 2000, mortality for mesothelioma, one type of asbestos cancer, has increased year on year; the number of deaths in 2010, the most recent year for which figures are available, was 2,347.³ Worse is to come according to Lord Freud, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Department for Work and Pensions, who told the House of Lords on May 20, 2013 that: “We expect there to be roughly 28,000 deaths from mesothelioma between July 2012 and March 2024.”⁴

In other asbestos-using countries similar epidemics have been reported. On June 12, 2013 a paper published in the American Journal of Industrial Medicine estimated that the potential years of life lost due to asbestos-related deaths around the world between 1994 and 2010 exceeded 2.3 million. People who died from mesothelioma and asbestosis lost, on average, 17 and 13 years respectively.⁵ The authors of this paper concluded: “The future burden of ARDs can be eliminated by stopping the use of asbestos.”

¹ Murray, H.M. *Departmental Committee on Compensation for Industrial Diseases Minutes of Evidence. Appendices and Index*. London: Wyman and Sons, 1907, pp. 127-128.

<http://archive.org/stream/cu31924002289290#page/n165/mode/2up>

² Emails from Darnton A. and Virta R. to Laurie Kazan-Allen. June 2013.

Darnton A. *Consequences of asbestos use in Great Britain*.

[http://www.bohs.org/uploadedFiles/Events/Past_Events/3a%20-%20Consequences%20of%20Asbestos%20Use%20in%20GB%20\(A%20Darnton\).pdf](http://www.bohs.org/uploadedFiles/Events/Past_Events/3a%20-%20Consequences%20of%20Asbestos%20Use%20in%20GB%20(A%20Darnton).pdf)

³ The estimate of 60,000+ deaths is based on HSE mesothelioma and asbestosis data for Great Britain:

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/tables/meso01.xls>

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/tables/asis01.xls>

Using the mesothelioma figures, estimates have been made for the number of asbestos-related lung cancer fatalities based on the HSE guideline of one asbestos-related lung cancer death for every mesothelioma death.

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/causdis/lungcancer/index.htm>

See: HSE. *Mesothelioma mortality in Great Britain 1968-2010*.

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/causdis/mesothelioma/mesothelioma.pdf>

HSE. *Mesothelioma*. <http://www.hse.gov.uk/statistics/causdis/mesothelioma/index.htm>

⁴ Lord Freud, May 20, 2013: Second reading of Mesothelioma Bill. Hansard source (Citation: HL Deb, 20 May 2013, c687) <http://www.theyworkforyou.com/lords/?gid=2013-05-20a.687.4>

⁵ Diandini, R, Takahashi, K, Park, E.-K, Jiang, Y, Movahed, M, Le, G. V, Lee, L. J.-H, Delgermaa, V and Kim, R (2013), *Potential years of life lost (PYLL) caused by asbestos-related diseases in the world*. Am. J. Ind. Med.. doi: 10.1002/ajim.22206. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/ajim.22206/abstract>

See also: Delgermaa V, Takahashi K et al. *Global mesothelioma deaths reported to the World Health Organization between 1994 and 2008*. Bulletin World Health Organization 2011.

<http://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/89/10/11-086678/en/>

Unfortunately, the use of asbestos continues unabated in many parts of the world. Although worldwide asbestos consumption peaked at 4.8 million tonnes in 1977,⁶ over the last fifteen years global usage has remained stable at around 2 million tonnes per year. During this time, total consumption has not altered significantly; however, the pattern of consumption has changed dramatically. Figures just released for 2012, substantiate allegations that when it comes to asbestos there is no such thing as equality. While developed countries have banned or reduced their use, consumption continues to increase in Asia. In 2012, Asian countries used 1,395,628 tonnes of asbestos, a 6% increase in one year. Asia now accounts for a whopping 71% of all global consumption (in 2011 this figure was 63%). The most dramatic revelation in the 2012 data was a huge increase of consumption in India, Vietnam and Indonesia, respectively up by 53%, 31% and 30%. Grassroots campaigners, documentary filmmakers and photographers have documented uncontrolled processing and use of asbestos in these countries. It is not difficult to predict what the future holds for people now employed in Mumbai, Hanoi or Jakarta asbestos factories and workshops.

In this era of almost instantaneous communication one might well ask why given all that is known about the human hazard posed by asbestos,⁷ its use continues to flourish in some parts of the world. The answer is to be found in the complex interaction of asbestos industry stakeholders, government officials, diplomatic representatives, politicians and professional advisors; the dirty dealings engaged in by the global band of asbestos profiteers, rival anything you will have read about “Big Tobacco.” Commenting on the behaviour of the asbestos industry Dr. Barry Castleman, author of the asbestos sourcebook: *Asbestos: Medical and Legal Aspects*, said:

“I think people need to understand that this is a criminal industry. They [asbestos businessmen] understand that their profits are based on avoiding the costs of prevention and compensation, that they need to do that by developing corrupt relationships with governments and politicians... they realize that in order to avoid the costs of prevention and compensation, they need to develop corrupt relationships with the government, they need to make sure that the government doesn't make them pay people that they victimize, that the government doesn't broadcast to the public about how deadly asbestos is and tell people to avoid it; that the government doesn't otherwise impose regulations on the manufacture and use of asbestos where workers are endangered, all of which increase the cost of using asbestos and in the market would favour alternative safer substitute products. So it's a political problem. More than anything else it's a political and economic problem. It's not that the public health workers in Thailand and other countries don't know that asbestos kills people. They know that very well.”⁸

The machinations of the global asbestos lobby were on show in May 2013 at the 6th Conference of the Parties (COP6) to the UN's Rotterdam Convention.⁹ The May 7-10 debates on chrysotile asbestos were closely monitored by a gang of asbestos lobbyists, businessmen, advisors and bully boys aided and abetted by industry-linked representatives who were part of national delegations; individuals such as Evgeny Kovalevsky, a scientist

⁶ *Worldwide Asbestos Supply and Consumption Trends from 1900 through 2003*. United States Geological Survey, 2006. <http://pubs.er.usgs.gov/publication/cir1298>

⁷ Kazan-Allen L. *Asbestos Policies of Major International Agencies*. April 8, 2013. http://ibasecretariat.org/lka_asb_polic_maj_int_agencies.php

⁸ See: Messages from the World's Scientists: IBAS LINK.

⁹ Kazan-Allen L. *Rotterdam Convention 2013 An Activist's Diary*. May 21, 2013. <http://ibasecretariat.org/lka-rotterdam-convention-an-activists-diary-may-2013.php>

well-known for his ties to the Russian asbestos industry, who was a member of the Russian delegation to COP6.¹⁰ The reality of what took place in Geneva was worse than we had expected. The outrageous lies, false premises and repeated misdirections were appalling to witness first-hand. What was clear to each of the 750+ people present during the plenary session asbestos diatribes was the total domination Russia, a country which only ratified the Convention in 2011, was exerting on the proceedings. The discredited arguments cited for opposing action on chrysotile were repeated parrot-fashion by delegates from the Russian gang of “asbestos refusniks,” including Ukraine, Kazakhstan Zimbabwe, Kyrgyzstan, Vietnam and India, thereafter referred to as the “Dirty 7.” Amongst the recycled industry propaganda used by the Dirty 7 to oppose the listing of chrysotile were the following:

- scientific evidence regarding the human health hazard posed by chrysotile asbestos is insufficient to justify listing;
- further research is necessary on asbestos substitutes; they could be more dangerous than asbestos;
- government research “proves” that chrysotile asbestos can be used safely under “controlled conditions”;
- the low biopersistence of chrysotile means that there is no health risk for human beings when it is used under “controlled conditions.”

Even if the above statements were correct, and they were not, according to the procedures of the Rotterdam Convention, they were not pertinent as chrysotile had met all the criteria for inclusion on Annex III of the Convention. Although there was overwhelming support at COP6 for listing chrysotile and an incredible level of frustration amongst the 140+ parties who supported inclusion, in the face of the Russian-led veto no action was taken. As a result the global trade in asbestos remains completely unregulated.

Despite the disgusting machinations of asbestos vested interests in Geneva, the fight-back by civil society at COP6 was impressive. Activities undertaken by the Rotterdam Convention Alliance (ROCA), a broad-based coalition of asbestos victims’ groups, trade unions, NGOs and health and safety campaigns, included:

- construction and maintenance of the ROCA booth; publication of ROCA position papers, briefing materials, daily updates and press releases;
- a public demonstration outside the conference hall calling for the inclusion of chrysotile on Annex III;
- an intervention during the plenary session debate on chrysotile calling for chrysotile to be listed;
- interventions regarding chrysotile during the Contact Group Meeting on Candidate Chemicals;
- the presentation of a letter to the President of COP6 signed by 28 asbestos victims' support groups in 15 countries on five continents that called on the Parties to the Rotterdam Convention to “support putting chrysotile asbestos on the Convention's list of hazardous substance;”
- the ROCA asbestos side event;
- the ROCA press conference.

¹⁰ Eighteen asbestos lobbyists from nine countries were accorded observer status at COP6. Ruff K. *Asbestos lobbyists determined to sabotage UN Rotterdam Convention*. April 25, 2013. <http://www.rightoncanada.ca/?p=1998>

The level and scope of activity mounted on the asbestos issue by ROCA members at COP6 was unprecedented as was the support and feedback they received. Discussions which began in Geneva are proceeding to identify options to regulate, restrict and ultimately outlaw the global asbestos trade. The solidarity and energy exhibited by the ROCA campaigners accurately reflect the continuing growth of the ban asbestos movement. New resources for this campaign are today (July 3, 2013) being launched at the annual seminar of the Parliamentary Asbestos Sub-Group. While they address different aspects of the global asbestos legacy and use different mediums to do so, they are both ground-breaking initiatives.

- Two video compilations – *Asbestos: The Facts* and *Messages from the World's Scientists* – contain interviews ¹¹ with eminent scientists. These independent experts endorse the scientific consensus on asbestos and comment on the criminal nature of the asbestos industry. Among a number of lies debunked by them is the myth that Asians might be immune to cancers caused by asbestos.
- A piece of digital art entitled: *The Female Face of Britain's Asbestos Catastrophe* ¹² by Colombian artist Guillermo Villamizar; this stunning image conceptualizes the catastrophe caused by asbestos in Britain over the last ninety years.

Concluding Thoughts

The bad old days when industry stakeholders had a stranglehold on media coverage and national debates on asbestos are long gone. The ban asbestos campaign which began life on the outer fringes of 20th century civil society has now migrated into mainstream debates on human rights, social justice, environmental racism and sustainable technology. The role played by asbestos victims' groups and ban asbestos campaigners in changing the public perception of asbestos from a symbol of modernization to an icon of capitalist exploitation has been fundamental. By challenging technical and medical 'experts' head-on, redefining the terms of asbestos policy discussions to include matters of public health as well as occupational hazards, and working more closely with social partners, they have transitioned an obscure but worthy movement into one widely regarded as an iconic example of 21st century citizens' mobilization. That this has been accomplished in the face of a ruthless and rich industry lobby that will spare nothing and no one in its pursuit of profits is a testament to the resolve of all those who have worked together to advance the ban asbestos movement. Our goals remain a global ban on asbestos and justice for all asbestos victims. An asbestos-free future is possible.

¹¹ Kazan-Allen L. *The Truth Is Out There!* July 4, 2013. IBAS website.

¹² Kazan-Allen L. *Evolution of: The Female Face of Britain's Asbestos Catastrophe.* July 4, 2013. IBAS website.