

Ban Asbestos Movement Gets Momentum

by Jagdish Patel

Dr. Annie Thébaud-Mony in Mumbai and Ahmedabad:

Dr. Annie Thebaud Mony, Director of Research, at the National Institute of Health & Medical Research (INSERM), Paris, France, visited India in her personal capacity to meet victims of asbestos related diseases and meet activists working on the issue to know ground realities and share her work in France.

Mumbai

Knowing ground realities



With the help of Occupational Health & Safety Centre activists, asbestos victims - workers, ex-workers and families of asbestos cement plants, brakes manufacturing (ex-Turner & Newal) and also workers having done or doing maintenance in insulation of power plants - are organized collectively and some of them succeeded in compensation claims. With Pralhad Malvadkar (OHSC), Surekha Sankpal (OHSC) and Jagdish Patel (People Training and Research Center, PTRC), Annie visited victims and their families in the

poorest part of the city of Mumbai on March 3, 2011. Ex-workers of asbestos cement plants and of a power plant are suffering from asbestosis, lung cancer, and other asbestos related diseases. Members of the families are also sick. The medical examinations are not very precise. So, for cases with breathlessness, there is a very serious problem of disability assessment. The activists & lawyers who are supporting victims are preoccupied by the difficulty for the victims to obtain the recognition of their disability and some compensation.

At the end of the day, a meeting gathered around 20 workers, ex-workers and families, who met in order to prepare claims for compensation with activists & lawyers. For Annie, it was a very instructive first contact with the reality of asbestos workers and victims in Mumbai, and the very hard experience of victims and activists fighting for the fundamental rights of victims to be cared and compensated.



Roundtable meeting on Mesothelioma and Asbestos related diseases - Public Health Research for Advocacy and Action, Tata Institute of Social Sciences



On 4 March round table meeting was organized at TISS, Mumbai. Incidentally it was National Safety Day for India. The meeting emphasized the invisibility of asbestos victims in India and the necessity for a multidisciplinary approach of asbestos related cancer, with the participation of the social movements. Participants emphasized on precise medical records and reconstitution of patient's job & environmental history for identifying the patient's history of the asbestos exposure itself. The French experience of the on-going study in Seine-Saint-Denis as well as the Italian & Australian experiences of registries were discussed as possible references, considering cancer cases as

'sentinel - event'. It was said that any local situation has its specificities. A working group could begin to work on a first project concerning Mesothelioma.

The participation of lawyers contributed to open the discussion on compensation strategies in front of the courts.

Ahmedabad

Dr Annie Thébaud-Mony reached Ahmedabad by train on March 5th from Mumbai.

Meeting Dr Shilin N. Shukla, Director of the Gujarat Cancer & Research Institute, Ahmedabad

She met Dr. Pankaj Shah and Dr Shukla with Dr. Jagdish Parikh (PTRC) and Raghunath Manvar (OHSA) on 5 March. Dr Shukla asked for such a meeting, because - he said - he is concerned by the fact that, since around 10 years, there is a mean of 10 or 15 mesothelioma per year in his medical service. There has been no specific research on the patient's history of exposure, but he has the impression that these cases could be basically due to environmental exposure. He asked for cooperation in order to begin some research on the problem of Mesothelioma.

Meeting asbestos victims in Ahmedabad

In the afternoon, Annie went to one of the asbestos contaminated areas of the city. The visit began around an asbestos cement plant, which is surrounded by poor housing and hundreds of families who live under asbestos cement roofs. She visited a family, of whom the father worked during 30 years in the asbestos cement plant, manufacturing asbestos cement sheets. He is suffering from a very severe asbestosis. Retired, but because he has not enough money for the financial support of his family, he has to continue working in contaminated workplaces in the same factory for a lower salary. His home (2 small rooms) is covered with asbestos cement sheets. He came with the visitors and joined the group of victims (workers and families), employees or ex-employees of the asbestos cement plant, Digvijay Cement Co, and of the Torrent Power Plant, for a meeting organized by the Occupational Health & Safety Association (OHSA) of Ahmedabad, at Gandhi Ashram.



The main objective of the association is *'to protect and generate awareness among industrial workers, including contractual workers regarding Health, Safety and Environmental working conditions prevailing in their respective industries'*. The association provides *'legal support to those workers, who have become the victims of occupational diseases'*. During the meeting, each of the worker and the widow of a deceased worker gave his/her testimony. The majority are contracted (non permanent) workers. They showed prescriptions for drugs, indicating that part of their revenue is used for buying them. One of the ex-worker of Torrent power plant pointed out, not without irony, that part of the drugs are produced by Torrent Pharmaceuticals, Annie has been impressed by their dignity and hope to be recognized in their legitimate struggle for compensation.

Lecture before Medical Professionals:



On March 5, Saturday, late evening, Annie spoke to the group of Medical professionals at a meeting organized

by PTRC in collaboration with Health Forum and IIPH, at Indian Institute of Public Health (IIPH). This meeting was attended by more than 28 participants from Gujarat Cancer Research Institute (GCRI), Indian Inst. of Public Health (IIPH), Sal Medical College (Ahmedabad), P.S. Medical College (Karamsad) and some private practitioners. Jagdish Patel welcomed all and invited participants to self introduce themselves. He then presented short talk on use of Asbestos products and ARDs reported in India.



Annie then shared her experiences and presented results of the study they carried out in 3 hospitals in France. The interdisciplinary team of experts drawn from faculties like Social Science, toxicology, occupational medicine, industrial hygiene, carried out detail interviews of the cancer patients to record their work history and find out if they were exposed to any carcinogens and if so, duration and concentration of the exposure. Amongst the 1014 patients included in the study, 84% were exposed to carcinogens (the most part of them exposed to more than one only substance). Relating their work history with their illness led them to conclude if the cancer was eligible for occupational cancer compensation. If it was, certificate to that effect was issued and patient was referred to the concerned department for compensation. They collected work history of 1014 cancer patients and issued certificate to 462 patients. Based on the certificate 219 patients succeeded in claiming compensation. She narrated the difficulties they came across and the recommendation they offered to the Government for changes. Lecture was followed by interesting discussion, comments and questions. She was amazed by questions on asbestos substitutes, which are known and used in Europe since more than 20 years. She understood that the question of the ban can seem in some part difficult to argue in such a context. They know the danger of asbestos, but asbestos is everywhere, and they feel that it is a mountain to move away the reality of this huge asbestos contamination.

Dr. Tapasvi Puwar (Health Forum) offered vote of thanks.

Lecture before civil society representatives:



Next day, on March 6, Sunday PTRC organized her lecture for civil society at Hotel Toran, Ahmedabad in morning session. 55 participants attended the program which included medical professionals, trade unions activists, lawyers, workers, students, media representatives and representatives of voluntary organizations. Jagdish Patel welcomed all saying how the issue of occupational health in general and of asbestos in particular is ignored. Clip developed by ABAN on asbestos hazards was then screened. He then gave his presentation in Gujarati. His presentation included information on properties of asbestos, history of asbestos, its uses, its hazards, its incidence in India, policies and data on its import in India. He then invited Annie to deliver her presentation. Annie, in her presentation talked on how international movement to ban asbestos was built including how IBAS and ABAN were formed. She presented the struggle of European asbestos victim's groups for justice and a total ban, which is effective since 2005, in the whole European Union. She informed the audience on asbestos related deaths in France and asbestos consumption in European and Asian countries. The next issues for the

international ban asbestos network are a *Global Ban*, all around the world, and the creation of an *international criminal labour & environment court*. At the end of her talk there was live discussion and questions. Her talk was translated intermittently by Jagdish Patel, which proved very helpful for those who did not know English. We received very good responses at the end of the program.