

ASBESTOS 2015: ARE WE SAFE?

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Presented at: Asbestos Diseases Society of Australia AGM
Perth, Australia, April 12, 2015

In February 2015, The Australian Customs and Border Protection Service admitted that it was unable to “guarantee that all imported goods will be free from asbestos,” despite the fact that asbestos and products containing it are illegal in Australia. To understand the significance of this admission, it is important to acknowledge three facts:

- China is the world’s biggest asbestos consumer;
- It is also the second biggest asbestos producer;
- China is Australia’s biggest trading partner.

In recent years, asbestos has been found in Australian purchases of Chinese plasterboard, gaskets, trains, mining equipment and cars; since 2008, only two prosecutions have been brought for these illegal imports.¹

Australia is not the only country to find itself in this situation. Data from the Indian Minerals Yearbook 2012 revealed that Indian asbestos-cement products were being shipped to Italy, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Israel, South Africa and Oman, all of whom have, like Australia, banned asbestos.² An analysis of global asbestos trade data covering the years 2011-2013, also gives cause for concern: figures show that asbestos was used during this period in France, Germany, Slovakia and Spain, all ban countries.

If the threat persists in the ban countries, how much worse is the situation where the use of asbestos remains legal? Throughout the 21st century, annual global asbestos usage has been around two million tonnes; most of it is consumed in Asia where there are few if any regulations preventing hazardous exposures. Throughout the region, the majority of asbestos-related diseases go unrecognized, untreated and uncompensated.

India

For years, India has been the biggest asbestos importer; between 1960 and 2013, India’s asbestos usage totalled around 7 million tonnes. In 2013, India was one of seven countries to block UN action to regulate the global trade in chrysotile (white) asbestos. Speaking at the Rotterdam Convention plenary discussion, the Indian spokesperson opposed the categorization of chrysotile asbestos as a hazardous substance saying that there was no significant environmental or work hazard posed by the use of chrysotile and therefore no need to take action on chrysotile.

In the UK our use of asbestos (also around 7 million tonnes) produced the country’s worst epidemic of occupational disease and death. Annually, nearly three times as many Britons die

¹ Ferguson, J. *5pc of imports get asbestos check, estimates hearing told*. The Australian, March 11, 2015.

² Kazan-Allen L. *Italy’s Asbestos Mystery*. January 14, 2015.

<http://ibasecretariat.org/lka-italys-asbestos-mystery.php>

from asbestos-related diseases as from road traffic accidents.³ Knowing what we know from the UK and Australian asbestos legacies, it is not unreasonable to suggest that there are many people suffering from asbestos-related diseases (ARDs) in India. Indian asbestos lobbyists use the lack of “official data” on ARDs to support their contention that asbestos use is safe. They are wrong. “The absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.”

Eight hundred and fifty former Indian employees of the British asbestos giant – Turner & Newall – have succeeded in getting compensation for asbestosis and lung cancer from the company’s UK Trust; payments ranged from £900 – £14,000. (Australian \$1,740 – 27,000).⁴ Granted these sums are not a lot for a human life, but they are something for people who have nothing. They are also visible proof, if it were needed, that people exposed to asbestos in India, like people in the UK or Australia, can get sick from these exposures.

Currently, more than 300,000 people in India are employed by companies processing or using asbestos-containing materials.⁵ Millions of construction workers are exposed to asbestos-containing building products and tens of thousands of workers are at risk from asbestos on ships being scrapped on India’s beaches. It is no exaggeration to say that India is facing an asbestos time bomb.

Changing India’s Asbestos Dialogue

The days when the propaganda of the asbestos lobby would go unchallenged in India are over. Grassroots activists are engaged in a multifaceted program to locate victims, support efforts to obtain diagnoses, facilitate compensation claims and provide a voice for the individuals and families whose lives have been sacrificed by the asbestos industry.

Several medical diagnosis camps have been held in the vicinity of asbestos-using plants or asbestos mines over recent years. In 2011, 245 former asbestos mine workers, male and female, were examined as part of an initiative mounted by the Mine Labour Protection Campaign (Rajasthan) and the Occupational Health and Safety Centre (Mumbai) in a remote village in Rajasthan. Chest X-rays were taken, sputum tests done and medical examinations carried out, as a result of which a staggering 50% of the cohort was diagnosed with asbestosis.

In 2013, grassroots activists took part in meetings with at-risk workers and trade unionists from a Gujarat power plant. Attempts were made to identify injured workers. In November 2014 health check-ups and X-rays were conducted on 63 individuals with 39 cases followed up in December. A medical camp was held last month (March, 2015).

In May 2015, the United Nations will once again consider the issue of whether or not the global trade in chrysotile asbestos should be regulated under the Rotterdam Convention. Ban asbestos campaigners, occupational health activists and trade unionists plan to hold a series of high-profile events in key Indian cities to challenge their government’s contention that

³ Using data retrieved from HSE online resources, it was calculated that asbestos-related deaths in 2013 could reach 5,000 [this does not include deaths from cancers of the larynx or ovary]. In 2013, there were 1,730 road accident fatalities.

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/255125/road-accidents-and-safety-quarterly-estimates-q2-2013.pdf

⁴ Email from Krishnendu Mukherjee, March 19, 2015.

⁵ *Position Paper - Asbestos in India*. March 2015.

asbestos can be used safely. Many of our colleagues will also be attending the meeting of the Rotterdam Convention in Geneva. Plans are well-advanced to make our views known about the profit-driven, rapacious attempt by vested interests to allow the international trade in chrysotile to continue unhindered and unmonitored.

Conclusion

To answer the question posed at the beginning of this presentation: Asbestos 2015: Are We Safe, the answer has to be no. We will not be safe until the production and sale of asbestos is banned worldwide and asbestos contamination has been eradicated. Until then, prevention is the only cure!