

ASBESTOS – WHAT WOULD SHAKESPEARE SAY?

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The history of the global asbestos industry is a tragic one. It is a tale of almost Shakespearean proportions involving betrayal, conspiracy, sacrifice and lots and lots of money. The cast of characters includes:

- individuals motivated solely by the need to advance their own positions – Macbeth;
- ruthless businessmen – Merchant of Venice;
- and grieving family members – Hamlet.

Were Shakespeare alive today, he would find a rich seam of material in the silent epidemic which has condemned millions of people to early graves. Perhaps he might even be tempted to reuse one of his most famous soliloquies:

“Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death.”¹

Shakespeare’s plays chronicled the lives of kings, queens and courtiers – they were the pop stars of their age. The fate of bit part players was of little concern to the great dramatist. Not a lot has changed since the 17th century. Newspapers are full of the latest political scandals and titbits about Hollywood celebrities but news about an epidemic which is maiming and killing ordinary men and women remains missing from national newspapers.

The Bad News

A few days ago (September 29, 2015), an explosive report was released at the 13th Congress of the European Trade Union Confederation. The briefing paper by Dr. Jukka Takala and others documented a shocking loss of life caused by asbestos exposures. Throughout the 28 member states of the European Union (EU), the scientists estimated that more than 47,000 people die every year from asbestos-related diseases.² The new EU mortality statistics are more than treble previous estimates but, as bad as they are, they do not tell the whole story as the deaths counted excluded:

- those from environmental or domestic asbestos exposures – which are killing even more people in asbestos hotspots than workplace exposures;
- fatalities from other asbestos-related diseases such as cancers of the larynx and ovary, and possibly stomach, colorectal and pharynx cancers;

¹ Macbeth Act 5, scene 5, 19–28.

² Takala J. *Eliminating occupational cancer in Europe*. September 29, 2015. Published by the European Trade Union Institute. http://ibasecretariat.org/takala_wp_2015_elim_occ_cancer_europe.pdf
Also see:

Takala J. *Editorial: Eliminating occupational cancer*. *Industrial Health* 2015, **53**, 307-309.
<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4551060/>

- asbestos-related mortality from European countries not in the EU, many of which continue to consume large amounts of asbestos and asbestos-containing products.³

The situation in Europe is the result of decades of asbestos use; from 1920 to 2014, the current members of the EU used an estimated 40 million tonnes of asbestos with consumption in the UK of around 7 million tonnes. Over the same period, a further 65 million tonnes was used in Europe by non-EU members. Europe is drowning in asbestos! While all 28 EU Members have banned asbestos, only 38 of the 53 Member States of the World Health Organization’s European Region have done so. This failure to take action on a known carcinogen puts the lives of 300 million Europeans at daily risk of hazardous exposures.

It is little wonder that between 1994 and 2008, half of all global deaths from the asbestos cancer mesothelioma were in Europe with the highest number of European fatalities reported in the UK, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Italy and Spain. The mesothelioma incidence in many East European countries remains unknown but if human biology is the same in Budapest as it is in London, there is serious cause for concern. Of course, it is not just Europeans who are dying from asbestos-related diseases. New research estimates that around the world, 250,000 people die from mesothelioma and asbestos-related lung cancer every year. Unfortunately with annual global asbestos consumption at two million tonnes, this avoidable epidemic is unlikely to end anytime soon.

The Good News

On every continent, asbestos victims’ groups and campaigning bodies are challenging the asbestos status quo and working to raise awareness of the price paid by ordinary men and women for the asbestos industry’s profits. For the last few years, Colombia has remained amongst the top three biggest asbestos users in South America, consuming an average of 17,059 tonnes/year between 2011 and 2014.

Asbestos Use in Colombia (tonnes)

2011	20,048
2012	25,164
2013	15,961
2014	7,063
Total	68,236

Until recently, Colombia’s asbestos dialogue was dictated by industry and government vested interests. As a result, the use of asbestos remained completely unregulated. It was, as one colleague remarked, just another white powder. The fact that a bill to ban asbestos will be discussed in Congress next Tuesday (October 6, 2015) is a reflection of progress made since 2013 by ban asbestos campaigners who have held high-profile events, engaged in consensus

³ In April 2015, the WHO Regional Director for Europe Dr Zsuzsanna Jakab told delegates to a WHO conference in Israel that asbestos-related diseases were killing 15,000 Europeans every year.
http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=50739#.VgaLT_2FNMs

building with civil society stakeholders and launched innovative outreach programs to raise public awareness of the asbestos hazard.⁴

India

India is the world's biggest importer of asbestos with hundreds of thousands of people routinely exposed to asbestos in factories, on construction sites, at ship-breaking yards, in public buildings and in homes. Between 2011 and 2014, Indian asbestos consumption totalled over 1.1 million tonnes; average annual consumption during this period was ~295,000 tonnes.⁵

Asbestos Use in India (tonnes)

2011	321,803
2012	493,086
2013	302,668
2014	379,011
Total	1,177,983

In a country where Members of Parliament own asbestos-cement factories, asbestos is regarded as just another raw material. Asbestos profits have been liberally disbursed to create a political, social and commercial climate in which sales of toxic asbestos products can and do flourish.

Grassroots campaigners in India have initiated projects to assist the injured and counter industry propaganda which maintains that asbestos can be used safely under "controlled conditions." Last Thursday (September 24), a diagnosis camp was held – under the auspices of the Occupational Health and Safety Center, Mumbai – at the premises of the Kamal Tiwari trade union in the area of Kolkata (Calcutta) called Garden Reach. This site was across the street from the Everest Industries asbestos factory. The manufacture of asbestos-cement construction products started there in 1938 under the ownership of the British asbestos giant T&N Ltd.⁶ On September 24th, fifteen workers and/or former workers were examined by Dr. V. Murlidhar and his medical team; it is believed that asbestosis was diagnosed in at least four of the workers. Compensation claims for these injuries will be submitted to the British-based T&N Trust; claims for two other similarly affected workers from this factory have succeeded.

⁴ Kazan-Allen L. *Challenging Colombia's Asbestos Status Quo*. September 7, 2015. <http://ibasecretariat.org/lka-challenging-colombias-asbestos-status-quo.php>

⁵ Gupta M. *Asbestos and its use in India - The Real Picture*. November 2014. Unpublished paper.

⁶ The Calcutta factory was T&N's 3rd asbestos plant in India.

Allen D, Kazan-Allen L., *India's Asbestos Time Bomb*. 2008. Chapter: Asbestos Multinationals in India: The Experience of Turner & Newall by Dr. Geoffrey Tweedale.

http://ibasecretariat.org/india_asb_time_bomb.pdf

Website of Evert Industries Ltd.

<http://www.everestind.com/products/roofing>

Vietnam

Strategically and politically, the importance of the asbestos market in Vietnam surpasses the amount of asbestos the country consumes.

Asbestos Use in Vietnam (tonnes)

2011	60,000
2012	79,000
2013	58,000
2014	9,194
Total	206,194

From 2011 to 2014, total consumption was 206,194 tonnes or 51,550/year. While other countries in the region purchased far more, the global asbestos lobby – led by Russian industrialists – regards the prospect of a Vietnam ban on asbestos as unthinkable.

Despite intensive pressure from vested interests, Vietnam is definitely on track for a ban. Following an international asbestos conference in Hanoi on September 7, 2015⁷ and an asbestos workshop two weeks later (September 22), the Government of Vietnam announced that a roadmap for the phasing out of the use of asbestos in roofing products by 2020 was being developed.⁸ As the vast majority of asbestos imported to Vietnam is used in the production of this material, this step would almost certainly lead to a total ban.

South Africa

From 1950 through the mid-1980s, South Africa was one of the world's leading asbestos producers; at its peak, national production was 380,000 tonnes/yr (1977). Before legislation was enacted banning asbestos production and use (in 2008), South Africa exported amosite (brown), crocidolite (blue) and chrysotile (white) asbestos to global markets.⁹ For nearly one hundred years, British multinationals invested in, operated and developed asbestos-producing and processing facilities in Southern Africa. When they walked away from their African asbestos liabilities, they abandoned at-risk workers and contaminated communities to their fate; as a consequence of their actions, tens of thousands of individuals are even now being exposed to hazardous levels of asbestos on a daily basis.

With its 37 derelict asbestos mines, the town of Kuruman in the Northern Cape Province was at the heart of South Africa's asbestos mining industry. Today, asbestos waste is ubiquitous and high levels of environmental pollution continue to pose a health hazard. Given

⁷ Vietnam: A-BAN takes stock of the asbestos campaign in the region. September 14, 2015.

<http://www.bwint.org/default.asp?Index=6612&Language=EN>

⁸ Asbestos in roof sheets still a threat to workers. September 25, 2015.

<http://vietnamnews.vn/society/276256/asbestos-in-roof-sheets-still-a-threat-to-workers.html>

⁹ Kazan-Allen L. *South Africa's Asbestos Crisis*. March 12, 2015.

<http://ibasecretariat.org/lka-south-africas-asbestos-crisis.php>

the circumstances, the existence of an epidemic of asbestos-related cancers and diseases in Kuruman and surrounding towns comes as no surprise.

A Kuruman-based citizens' group, the Asbestos Interest Group (AIG),¹⁰ has documented asbestos contamination in Kuruman schools, some of which are even built of asbestos-containing bricks.¹¹ On South Africa's Youth Day (June 16, 2015), the AIG brought together dozens of primary and secondary school children as well as school staff members to take part in an asbestos workshop that sought to:

- raise asbestos awareness amongst the students in an age-appropriate manner;
- alert school managers to the hazards posed by asbestos-containing products and contamination in and around schools;
- educate participants on the region's asbestos history, the types of asbestos-related diseases and measures for preventing hazardous exposures.

Children from eight primary and two secondary schools took part along with three principals, nine teachers, twelve school governors and a representative from the Department of Education; they heard presentations and participated in discussion groups and activities developed under the "Youth against Asbestos Project," including an artistic competition. This month (October 2015), the AIG is holding an Asbestos Awareness Day to reach out to community members and former workers and facilitate access to useful information and resources for those affected.

Concluding Thoughts

The grassroots efforts described above illustrate the David and Goliath battle now raging over asbestos around the world. Asbestos victims, campaigners and concerned citizens will no longer tolerate a situation which allows industrial interests to take precedence over human life. Ending asbestos-related diseases is simple: ban asbestos and eradicate its presence from national infrastructures. If Shakespeare were alive today, I am sure he would have something to say – no doubt in iambic pentameters – about the effects of the "killer dust." In his absence, and on behalf of all of us who are part of the global campaign for asbestos justice, I will simply reaffirm our commitment to an asbestos-free future.

¹⁰ The AIG was founded in 2001 by community members from the villages of: Gamopedi, Ncweng, Sedibeng, Lokaleng, Gasehubane and Seven miles in response to the local epidemic of asbestos-related diseases.

¹¹ Kazan-Allen, L. *Awareness Workshop in South African Asbestos Town*. July 6, 2015

Children from eight primary and two secondary schools were invited to take part along with three principals, nine teachers, twelve school governors and a representative from the Department of Education. <http://ibasecretariat.org/lka-awareness-in-south-african-asbestos-town.php>