

there we stood ready to issue press releases; develop industry testimony; prepare summaries for the media of the day's proceedings; arrange for media interviews with industry witnesses; and, in general, establish ourselves as a scientific resource center for disseminating material from the medical and technical literature supporting the industry's position. It all worked reasonably well and the tactics we developed as a matter of logical necessity have since become standard for handling hearings of a controversial health-related nature.

The real fireworks, however, occurred in the hearing room itself, where representatives of J-M and the asbestos industry shot it out toe-to-toe with the Mount Sinai crowd and their top guns in organized labor. What those hearings taught me was that, from a media relations standpoint, nothing the PR professional can do to position such a proceeding as a logical discussion of the issues will ever compete against the sheer drama of two proponents of opposing positions ripping each other's guts out in a public forum.

Unfortunately, J. Corbett McDonald, M.D., the doctor from McGill University who had been chief investigator in the huge industry-sponsored study of the Quebec asbestos mining industry, was ill-prepared for the personal abuse he was to take from Dr. Selikoff's associates. They questioned not only his data, but his veracity, and indeed implied that he was nothing less than a paid lackey of the asbestos industry. His only problem was that he had produced evidence that the asbestos miners in Quebec were not dying at the same rate as Dr. Selikoff's insulation workers, and that their exposure had to be exceedingly heavy for any disease to show up at all. Without directly saying so, he was casting doubt on Dr. Selikoff's fundamental proposition that the mortality experience of the insulation workers was reflective of conditions throughout the asbestos industry. If the asbestos miners were an exception to the Selikoff rule, then perhaps other segments of the industry were exempt as well.

Dr. Wright, who had the audacity to call for stricter standards on crocidolite and amosite — the types of asbestos most closely linked with mesothelioma — than on chrysotile, received the same type of abuse. Dr. Wright, however, conducted himself with greater composure and gave as well as he took.

A fundamental principle of crisis public relations rooted itself in my brain: I would never again, if I had anything to say about it, allow a client or a representative of a client to enter into such a situation without extensive confrontational communications training. It would be unfair to the client and would, indeed, be destructive of his or her position. I have never wavered in that conviction and have, in fact, refused to work with clients who declined such training.