

Letters

Scientists Appeal to Quebec Premier Charest to Stop Exporting Asbestos to the Developing World

January 28, 2010

Dear Premier Charest:

As scientists from 28 countries, dedicated to protecting public health, we appeal to you to respect the overwhelmingly consistent body of scientific evidence and the considered judgment of the World Health Organization (WHO) that all forms of asbestos have been shown to be deadly and that safe use of any form of asbestos has proven impossible anywhere in the world.

We appeal to you to act honorably and to listen to Quebec's own public health experts,¹ prominent health experts across Canada,² as well as the Canadian Medical Association,³ the Quebec Cancer Society,⁴ and the World Health Organization (WHO),⁵ who have all called for the use and export of asbestos to end.

We wish to draw your attention to the following troubling points, which suggest that your government is practicing a double standard, thus bringing dishonor on Quebec's international reputation.

1) *Quebec itself is experiencing an epidemic of asbestos-related disease.*

In Quebec itself, exposure to asbestos is the single biggest cause of worker death. Figures for 2009 from the Quebec Workers' Compensation

Board show 60% of occupational deaths were caused by asbestos.⁶

Other statistics confirm that Quebec is experiencing an appalling epidemic of asbestos-related disease. Official data shows 134 new cases of mesothelioma reported in Quebec in 2004,⁷ and Quebec's National Public Health Institute (INSPQ) reports 211 cases of asbestosis in 2004.⁸ It is well-recognized that for every case of mesothelioma, asbestos causes two to three times as many cases of lung cancer.⁹

This gives a total of 612 new cases of asbestos-related disease in Quebec in 2004 (134 recorded cases of mesothelioma, 211 recorded cases of asbestosis, and a conservative estimate of 268 cases of lung cancer).

From 1992 to 2006, the annual number of Quebec cases of mesothelioma has risen from 92 to 142.⁷

We note that in 2007, facing high numbers of cases of asbestosis, your government's health authorities set up a special program, using a mobile x-ray clinic to travel around the province and give chest x-rays to construction workers, in an endeavor to identify and aid workers with signs of asbestosis.¹⁰

This is a public health calamity and one that would not have happened if the industry's denial of the hazards of asbestos had not been believed. And as leading expert Professor Paul Demers of the University of British Columbia states, "Much of the burden of asbestos-related disease remains unrecognized."¹¹

We call on you not to export this same public health tragedy to developing countries, where surely there is more than enough injustice and suffering already.

2) *Quebec itself does not use chrysotile asbestos.*

Quebec itself uses virtually none of the asbestos it mines, in spite of major infrastructure projects currently underway. The government's 2002 policy of increased use of chrysotile asbestos in Quebec¹² is a policy that has not been implemented, as the people of Quebec, in order to protect their own and their children's health, do not want asbestos in their schools, hospitals, or homes. Instead, virtually all Quebec's asbestos is exported to developing countries, where protections are few and awareness of the hazards of asbestos almost non-existent.

3) *Quebec is removing chrysotile asbestos from its buildings.*

Your government is spending millions of dollars to remove chrysotile asbestos and other forms of asbestos from Quebec's schools, hospitals, and buildings, while at the same time exporting it to developing countries and telling them it is safe. This seems to represent a high level of hypocrisy.

Furthermore, Quebec has the financial resources, trained experts and specialized equipment to remove dangerous deteriorated chrysotile asbestos from its buildings; developing countries do not.

4) *Quebec itself has failed to achieve "safe use" of chrysotile asbestos.*

Your government's own expert Public Health Institute (INSPQ) has published 15 reports,¹³ all of them documenting that it has proven impossible to handle

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chrysotile asbestos safely in Quebec itself. The INSPQ states that "safe use" of chrysotile asbestos is likely impossible, particularly for construction workers, and it therefore opposes your government's policy of increased use of chrysotile asbestos.¹⁴

A research project by several of your government's top health agencies found that, in the miniscule number of workplaces in Quebec still using chrysotile asbestos today, there was a 100% failure rate to practice "safe use" standards. The report recommended that equipment containing asbestos be replaced by safer, non-asbestos containing equipment.¹⁵

When Quebec itself is unable to achieve "safe use" of chrysotile asbestos, how can anyone pretend that chrysotile asbestos can be handled safely in developing countries, which lack the resources, regulatory controls, and technological advantages Quebec enjoys?

5) *There is no safe exposure level for chrysotile asbestos.*

According to a spokesperson for Quebec's Occupational Health and Safety Commission (CSST), the government of Quebec has adopted a "zero tolerance" policy for exposure to asbestos.¹⁶ We applaud your government for seeking thus to protect Quebec workers from asbestos harm. We call on you to show equal concern for the lives of workers in the developing world.

We are deeply troubled that, instead, your government is endorsing the position of the Chrysotile Institute, telling developing countries that exposure of 1 fibre of chrysotile asbestos per cubic centimetre of air (1 f/cc) is perfectly safe for them.¹⁷ While this is indeed the position of the asbestos industry, it is not the position of independent experts. The WHO, the Canadian Cancer Society, the US Surgeon General, and the fifty countries who have banned chrysotile asbestos state that there

is no safe exposure level for chrysotile asbestos. Exposure levels of 1 f/cc will cause unnecessary disease and death for those exposed.

We find it shocking that the exposure level you endorse for people overseas is ten times higher than the level permitted by all of the other provinces in Canada, by the US, by the European Union, and by other Western industrialized countries. It is one hundred times higher than the exposure level permitted in several countries, such as Germany, Switzerland, and the Netherlands.

We note that samples taken during a five-year period from 1995 to 2000 for asbestos workers at Thetford Mines showed that the 1 f/cc standard was exceeded in more than 10% of the samples, with workers being exposed to levels from 1.02 f/cc to 5.15 f/cc.¹⁸

A recent CBC documentary *Canada's Ugly Secret*¹⁹ showed workers in India handling Quebec's asbestos who are exposed to far higher levels than 1 f/cc.

6) *Industry misinformation is funded by your government.*

Chrysotile asbestos represents 100% of the world asbestos trade. It represents 95% of all the asbestos ever used. The chrysotile asbestos industry in Quebec, Kazakhstan, Zimbabwe, and Russia all claim that chrysotile asbestos can and is being safely used.

The information put out by the asbestos industry is, however, completely discredited. Health experts in Quebec and around the world have documented and condemned the misleading and untruthful information the industry disseminates.²⁰

We draw to your attention to the fact that a favorite expert of the Chrysotile Institute (a registered lobby group for the Quebec asbestos industry funded by your government²¹ and on whose board a representative of your government sits) is Christopher Booker,²² who has no apparent scientific credentials and who considers climate

change, harm from chrysotile asbestos, harm from tobacco smoke, and harm from lead in gasoline to all be hysterical hoaxes.²³

Recently, the pro-chrysotile movement and Dr. Jacques Dunnigan (a long-time employee and spokesperson for the Chrysotile Institute) falsely presented to the Quebec public a US Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) Priority List of Hazardous Substances based on the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA, also known as "Superfund")²⁴ as evidence proving that chrysotile asbestos is a low threat to health, noting that chrysotile asbestos is #119 on the list.

What they did not disclose, however, is that the list relates only to clean-up of wastes at Superfund toxic sites in the US, where chrysotile asbestos is not significantly present. If Dr. Dunnigan and the pro-chrysotile movement had bothered to read the list, they would have seen that amosite asbestos, which they themselves recognize as an extremely hazardous substance, is listed at #131, that is, less hazardous than chrysotile asbestos, and plutonium, an extremely deadly substance, is listed at #121.

In fact, the US DHHS website specifically provides a warning that the list is NOT a list of most toxic substances and should NOT be treated as such.²⁵

We find it incomprehensible and extremely disappointing to learn that Radio-Canada's news program *Le Téléjournal* presented the list to its viewers as authentic evidence of the low risk of chrysotile asbestos, when the most elementary journalistic standards, such as reading the list or the document containing the list, would immediately reveal this purported evidence to be a hoax.²⁶ It is hard to believe that Dr. Dunnigan and Radio-Canada could demonstrate such extreme ignorance and irresponsibility, but the alternative explanation of deliberate deception is even more disturbing.

We note that in an earlier program on chrysotile asbestos, *Le Téléjournal* interviewed five people, every one of whom was a proponent of, and had a connection to, the asbestos industry. In response to complaints, the Radio-Canada ombudsman ruled that *Le Téléjournal's* program was biased and violated the journalism standards of Radio-Canada.

7) Efforts by the asbestos industry to intimidate and silence scientists.

We note with dismay that the asbestos industry, as well as Laurent Lessard, a minister in your government who represents the asbestos mining area, have vilified and threatened your government's National Public Health Institute (INSPQ), thus creating a climate of intimidation to inhibit health professionals from practicing independent science without fear or favor. Bernard Coulombe, who is a director of the Chrysotile Institute and president of the Jeffrey asbestos mine, has called the INSPQ "a little bunch of Talibans"²⁷ and Minister Lessard has spoken of "repercussions" on the INSPQ.²⁸

We note also that the asbestos industry's supporters have informed your government that they are displeased that the INSPQ's research reveals health problems caused by asbestos, strongly implying that they would like you to silence the inconvenient truths about asbestos that the INSPQ documents.²⁹

We are extremely disturbed that the asbestos industry in India—Quebec's number one asbestos customer, with whom the Quebec industry works closely—has recently sent letters to a number of scientists in India saying that legal action will be taken against them if they do not retract their statements and published articles concerning the threat to health posed by chrysotile asbestos.

The asbestos industry, including the Quebec Chrysotile Institute that your government funds, has a long history of seeking to silence,

by lawsuits or other means, those who oppose the use of asbestos. In November 2007, the Quebec Chrysotile Institute filed a lawsuit in France against the National Association of Victims of Asbestos (ANDEVA), causing them financial and human costs, only to withdraw the case on the courthouse steps in March 2009 after ANDEVA refused to be intimidated.

These actions by the asbestos industry to intimidate and silence scientists are a threat by vested interests to scientific and academic freedom of speech and we call on you, on the eve of your trade mission to India, to categorically condemn such actions against scientists and to give your unequivocal support to your government's own health scientists.

8) Sabotage of a United Nations environmental convention.

We note that your government and the asbestos industry have successfully lobbied the Canadian government to block the listing of chrysotile asbestos as a hazardous substance under a United Nations (UN) environmental convention (the Rotterdam Convention), thus preventing the recommendation of the Convention's expert scientific body from being implemented, and thus also jeopardizing the mandate of the Convention.

The Rotterdam Convention was created specifically to protect people in developing countries and countries in economic transition from being harmed by hazardous substances. It provides the basic human right of prior informed consent, requiring that countries be informed that a substance they may import is hazardous.

It is extremely troubling to see Quebec instigate sabotage of a UN environmental convention and thus deny a basic human right that is taken for granted in Quebec itself. This obstruction helps the industry's sales. But it brings Quebec into international disrepute.

Under Canadian law, chrysotile asbestos is classified as a hazardous substance, but the Quebec government has successfully lobbied to prevent it being recognized as such under international environmental law, thus creating a double standard of protection as if some lives were less deserving of protection than others.

We note that at the December 2009 Copenhagen Conference you called on Canada to show stronger commitment to implementing the UN Climate Change Convention. We ask you to show similar commitment to implementing the UN Rotterdam Convention.

OUR APPEAL TO YOU

In light of the above disturbing facts, we appeal to you, as you are about to leave on a trade mission to India, to show the integrity and honor that the world expects of Quebec. We ask that you listen to the overwhelming evidence put forward by independent health experts, including your own Quebec health experts, and not succumb to the political lobbying of the asbestos industry.

We call on you, as well as the leaders of the other Quebec political parties, to end Quebec's export of asbestos, to stop funding the Chrysotile Institute, to support the listing of chrysotile asbestos under the UN Rotterdam Convention, to assist the last 340 asbestos miners and their community with economic diversification, and to address the asbestos disease epidemic in Quebec.

We thank you for giving our request your consideration and look forward with hope and anticipation to receiving your response.

Sincerely,

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