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Chief doctor says he tried 'to be human'

By CLAUDE ARPIN

The central figure in the current controversy surrounding health hazards faced by asbestos workers in Thetford Mines is a 67-year-old doctor whose policy was "to do as much good for the workers as possible without harming them."

Dr. Paul Cartier, who operated on this principle when director of the companies' clinic which checked workers for possible asbestos-related lung ailments, admits he did not insist that affected workers leave their jobs and seek workman's compensation benefits.

Dr. Cartier, who ran the clinic from 1940 until last year, says he tried to do his best; to be human.

"When a worker came to me and I saw from his x-rays that he had slight abnormalities in his lungs, I told him, in an effort to be as humanitarian as possible: 'Look, you've got the slight beginnings of a lung problem. Now, are you happy at your job? Do you want to stay there? Or do you wish to apply for compensation and be transferred elsewhere in the plant? If you stay where you are it won't affect your condition that much and if you become incapacitated you can always apply for compensation then.'

"Even if they had left their work completely and gone on to drive cabs, for instance, it might not have arrested the progressive effects of asbestosis.

"So I figured it was in their best interests to stay at their jobs. Besides, they didn't want to be reported ill and transferred to a lower-paying job where they might have earned as much as \$50 less a week.

"And if I had reported them ill and brought about their transfer to lower-paying jobs, the unions would have lodged grievances and the workers would have been reinstated to their former jobs anyway."

Cartier says it is "still debatable" whether asbestosis would have subsided in a patient who was removed from an asbestos polluted environment the minute the disease was diagnosed.



Dr. Paul Cartier

"From what modern medicine knows about the disease, there appears to be a slight progression even after contact with asbestos fibres has ceased."

He admits there were "a few unfortunate incidents" involving workers who died a few months after receiving a clean bill of health from his clinic.

"But most of these deaths seemed to be the result of heart problems, which may or may not have been connected to lung ailments."

Cartier says, however, that when a

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Doctor felt it best for men to stay on

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person has an asbestos-related lung ailment, the right ventricle of his heart, which operates in conjunction with the lungs, has to work overtime and this could lead to a fatal enlargement of the ventricle.

"But it is so hard to show a direct relationship between the two (lung disease and heart failure) that Montreal's two top pathologists refuse systematically to perform autopsies on this type of death because they know they can't prove the relationship in the event of a court case."

While Cartier freely admits he acquiesced to workers' wishes to remain at their jobs in spite of the hazards, he vehemently denies any collusion between himself and the mining companies which paid his salary and for the upkeep of the clinic.

"I can swear that I was never given any directives by the companies and that I acted solely on the basis of my extensive training in some of the world's leading medical centres."

Union claims that Cartier was reluctant to refer workers to the Workmen's Compensation Board because the companies didn't want to pay a lump sum compensation premiums are "totally false," he says.

"I worked on the principle that if the worker showed a slight trace of asbestosis I warned him about it and let him decide if he wanted to remain at his job.

"My policy was to try and do as much good for him as was possible without causing him any harm.

"I was acting on behalf of the worker who was worried about losing income. I wasn't doing it for pecuniary rewards from the companies. I've never been one to go in for that sort of thing. I worked myself through medical school by keeping a job at the post office from 6 p.m. to 3 a.m. every day.

"But no matter what I say, people are still going to think that I had sold out to the companies. I just tried to do my best."

Cartier says that throughout his career at the clinic he was under the impression that if the condition of workers was being made worse by their continued exposure to asbestos fibres this fact would have been brought to his attention by the Quebec Asbestos Mining Association.

"The association was forever financing costly research-projects, and impressive medical teams visited my clinic from leading hospitals in Detroit, New York, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh.

"I would have made recommendations for improving working conditions but I was hampered by these big-name teams which spent up to two months at a time here.

"They spent an enormous amount of money and I figured that if there was anything wrong with our operation they would have made recommendations to the companies.

"When they came I reproached them on the fact that they didn't seem to follow up their tests with recommendations for improving working conditions."

"They could have made a great contribution with all their up-to-date expertise. They were in a better position than our little clinic which was isolated from medical centres. I thought they would recommend improvements to the industry but they never seemed to do it.

"I was open to recommendations. But it was embarrassing for a little French Canadian doctor in the hood-docks like me to come along after all those big shots and tell the industry to make improvements.

"The companies would surely have told me to mind my own business, that the leading world experts had

found nothing to complain about, so who was I to add my two cents worth.

"I guess I was too timid; I should have spoken out. My friends have always told me that I'm too timid."

Cartier remains sceptical, however, about the validity of the recent Mount Sinai study which found a very high incidence of lung disease among veteran Thetford Mines workers.

He says that during contract negotiations which led to the violent and bitter asbestos strike of 1949, sought to dramatize their demands by trying to establish a link between asbestos mining and tuberculosis. The asbestos workers now are on strike for the first time since 1949 and safety causes are among their chief demands.

"Today, the same thing is true and in order to make their point that mining asbestos leads to asbestosis, they commissioned Dr. Irving Selikoff of the Mount Sinai College of Medicine in New York to study the situation here.

"Now, it is common knowledge in our field that Selikoff finds 100 per cent more abnormalities in lung x-rays than anyone else.

"When you read x-rays — and I used to read 10,000 a year in my day — you can over-read, under-read or arrive at a happy medium.

"Selikoff over-reads and the unions knew that and that's why they went after him."

Cartier says that by over-reading, any doctor can look at x-rays of the lungs of persons over age 50 in any line of work and discover "all sorts of abnormalities."

'Clinic revamped,' says new chief

By JOSH FREED

THETFORD MINES — The asbestos companies' clinic here has been revamped, says Dr. Michel Lesage, the man responsible for the clinic since April, 1974.

Lesage, filling the newly created post of company "medical advisor," is a doctor, lawyer and radiologist whose most recent position was advisor to the ministry of social affairs.

Lesage has hired a new physician, Richard Lambert, to replace Dr. Paul Cartier, former head and now consultant at the clinic. Cartier will retire in June.

"I think it was a good clinic when it was set up," Lesage said, "but in recent years it had fallen somewhat behind the times."

The companies should have taken steps to update the clinic's operation earlier, he said, but added that unions and government also could have taken more initiative in improving conditions.

Lesage said that as of Jan. 1 the clinic was completely revamped, with the addition of modern equipment, and a policy of complete medical check-ups. Previously, workers had been checked only for asbestos-related diseases.

"Anyone with lung scarring or asbestos-related diseases will be sent for an immediate examination at the Workmen's Compensation Board clinic in Montreal, so that no one will suddenly surface with disabilities higher than 10 per cent," Lambert said.

"But I'm sure it will take time to re-establish the clinic's credibility. Many workers appear to have lost confidence in it."

Lesage intends to press for improvements in the area of disease prevention as well. He says the Thet-

ford Mines companies have spent \$20 million on ventilation alone in the last five years, but adds "it is not enough" in light of the Mount Sinai results.

Asbestos safety to be tightened

The Star's Quebec Bureau

QUEBEC — Tougher inspection and stiffer fines will be introduced early this year to control conditions hazardous to Quebec asbestos miners, Mines and Natural Resources Minister Gilles Masse announced yesterday.

But the minister told the national assembly the existing air pollution standards would remain in force.

Masse said the number of mine inspectors would be increased to 21 from 17 and spot checks would be made without advising the union and company in advance.

He said the practice in the past had been to give 24 hours notice of a visit by an inspector so that the unions could arrange to have a representative available.

Masse said the present system of fines, providing for a \$25-a-day penalty for a company violating the rules, were "very minimal, ridiculous."

The minister said he was unable to say yet how strict the new fines would be.

The present on-the-job pollution limit of five asbestos fibres per cubic centimetre of air will remain in force, Masse said.

The level is accepted by U.S. authorities, he said. A reduction to two fibres per cubic centimetre, as demanded by the Canadian union, is "not technically possible," Masse said.

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Lesage
Lambert