

Thetford Mines tragedies

Asbestosis 'a fact of life'

By JOSH FREED
Star Staff Reporter

THETFORD MINES — "Welcome to Quebec's asbestos country," reads the cheery sign on the highway leading into the town of Thetford Mines. The sign goes on to say that local asbestos companies employ 6,300 people, earning an annual total of \$50 million.

It would do well to add the results of a recent study by a Mount Sinai Medical School team which showed that 61 per cent of 1,200 asbestos workers in Thetford Mines with more than 20 years' experience have developed lung abnormalities, while 52 per cent have asbestosis.

The study once again focused public attention on the tiny North American asbestos capital, which already had more than its share of trouble.

In December, a fire destroyed an Asbestos Corp. mill, throwing 850 people out of work. Within days the town's unemployment rate leapt to 33 per cent when 850 more jobs were lost because of the closing of the Sno Jet snowmobile plant and Bellevue Mobile Homes factory.

The Mount Sinai study indicating that many of the remaining Thetford Mines jobs may endanger workers' health has brought different reactions.

The Quebec Association of Asbestos Mines said the report was "preliminary" and "incomplete." It added that studies by McGill University researchers since 1966 have found that the death rate among asbestos workers is lower, in general, than that of the Quebec population as a whole.

However, CNTU-affiliated unions, which represent most asbestos workers in the Thetford Mines area, have been using the report as a major bargaining tool in contract negotiations. The CNTU partially financed the study.

Outsiders have been shocked by the idea that asbestos workers may be sacrificing their health for an hourly wage of \$3.63 to \$5 depending on job functions.

Remarkably, the people who seem least shocked by the study's findings are the asbestos workers themselves.

Conversations with workers and their families in Thetford Mines indicated to this reporter a passive and depressed mining population, amongst

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Youths afraid of mine work

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whom death and infirmity from asbestosis and related problems are accepted facts of life.

"Surprised by the findings?" said George Dionne, a 59-year-old mill electrician. "No, I would have been surprised by anything else.

"I've worked in that mill for 42 years and not many of those I worked with are still there. Most are either dead, dying or collecting workman's compensation.

"Me, I've got to face the facts. I'm one of the 1,200 people checked in that Mount Sinai study, and even though I won't get my personal results for another month, I suppose I probably have a touch of it.

"But I can still work in the mill — I just get a little short of breath sometimes . . . that's all."

"Don't believe a word he says," confides his wife moments later. "He can't even walk up the stairs without losing his breath and stopping. He's proud, my husband — but he's a sick man. He's got 'it' all right!"

"It," as Mrs. Dionne and most of the townspeople refer to the disease, is asbestosis.

Asbestosis, which has an incubation period of at least 20 years, is the scarring of the lungs by asbestos fibres, causing short windedness and sometimes death. Lung cancer and a swelling of the heart that also can be fatal have been linked to the disease, the full effects of which have yet to be determined.

Tolerance

Tolerance to asbestosis differs markedly in individuals but once contracted, the disease may continue to accelerate even if the person is no longer exposed to asbestos fibres. There is disagreement about how much exposure can be harmful because of the variation in tolerance.

There is no doubt that the incidence of lung cancer is abnormally high among asbestos workers.

Dr. Susan Daum, a member of the Mount Sinai team says in a book called Work Is Dangerous To Your Health: "One in five asbestos workers dies of lung cancer. Only one out of 30 smokers does."

Over the past five years, people in Thetford Mines have come to suspect the disease in every death, sometimes justifiably, other times perhaps not. Nonetheless, its effect is obviously widespread, and many of the town's residents have stories such as that of Raoul Larochelle, 70.

"Asbestosis, both my brothers-in-law died of it. The company doctor said they were healthy, but doctors in the U.S. told them they had asbestosis. They both got workman's compensation and died about six years ago."

"Me, I quit the mines in 1940, after 11 years of work — otherwise I'd be dead too."

The Mount Sinai study suggested that the cause of the widespread health problems in Thetford Mines was the exceptionally high levels of asbestos pollution in the mines and mills which it said ranged from 16 to 36 fibres of five microns per cubic centimetre of air at four different mills.

The test samples were taken by workers at at least five sites in each mill, then analysed by members of the Mount Sinai team.

The four mills in which tests were taken were King Beaver and Normandy, both owned by Asbestos Corp.; National Mine, owned by Lake Asbestos; and Carey Canadian which is owned by a company of the same name. The companies have not disputed the test readings.

Limits

The U.S. imposes a legal limit of five fibres of five microns per cubic centimetre of air and may reduce it to two, a limit already mandatory in Britain and Germany. Britain, in fact, may shortly reduce it further, because British doctors claim a two-fibre level still produces asbestosis in those who work 40 years.

In Ontario, the legal level now is two fibres and Ontario's largest asbestos mine, Johns-Manville Reeves shut down last month saying it could not comply with the new standards.

In Quebec, there is no official limit on fibres but the government accepts the U.S. standards, treating them as objectives rather than legal limits. Union and company sources say government inspectors appear infrequently, giving several days' notice of their visit, and many workers complained that massive clean-ups always precede inspection.

Unions affiliated to the CNTU and Quebec Federation of Labor, representing the 3,500 asbestos workers in the area, now are demanding the right to conduct their own pollution inspections.

One management official, who did not want to be quoted by name said: "Things are better than before, but asbestos particles are always flying around and inspectors never get a real picture."

"In Nordenham, Germany," he said, "Asbestos Corp., the company I work for, recently built a new plant we're always hearing about that maintains that the German limit is two fibres — two fibres!"

"Here, the study said it was over

15 fibres, and I can believe it. It's no fun in that mill . . . let me tell you."

Dr. Donald Haigh, a Canadian who worked with the Mount Sinai team, said death by asbestosis is not always easy to prove. A heart condition or lung disease may or may not have been caused or aggravated by asbestosis, he said.

28 deaths

Nonetheless CNTU and QFL records show that in the last six years alone at least 28 deaths in Thetford Mines have been directly attributed to asbestosis in autopsies requested by the families of the deceased.

At present, 245 people in Thetford Mines are receiving workmen's compensation benefits for disabilities suffered due to asbestosis (the total for Quebec is 383); close to 100 other

Thetford Mines workers have applied for compensation and are awaiting results of medical tests.

Disability may be rated as high as 100 per cent, bringing the recipient 75 per cent of his former annual salary. But most workers receiving benefits are rated between 10- and 25-per-cent disabled.

One man receiving a 25-per-cent disability benefit is a 57 year-old "retired" employee garnering \$124 a month compensation. For 35 years this worker, who asked not to be named, was a millwright; today he is a pale man with watery, protruding eyes and flaccid skin. He breathes with great difficulty, often pausing in mid-sentence to rest.

This man said he was always told he was in good health at the annual company clinic check-up, but that he grew concerned about his short-windedness and recurrent chest pains. Five years ago, his family doctor finally convinced him to visit the Workmen's Compensation Board clinic in Montreal.

"They told me I had asbestosis, gave me a 25-per-cent compensation benefit and suggested that the company transfer me out of the mill. I was made a janitor and lost my seniority. I didn't really want to take the job because of my health but how can you live on \$124 compensation a month?"

"I worked as a janitor the last four years—but the last year I couldn't even bend to wash the floors, so finally I listened to my doctor and quit in September. I've applied for a higher disability pension, but I'm worried they may blame my problems on my heart. You never know."

This worker had seven brothers, five of whom worked in the mines. Three of them died at 59, 60 and 61 respectively, two while collecting workman's compensation for asbestosis, the third of a heart condition. A fourth brother, 61, has been collecting 50-per-cent compensation for asbestosis for the past 10 years, and a fifth quit the mines several years ago.

His remaining two brothers, a butcher and a salesman respectively, are both alive and in good health.

He said a next door neighbor, a millworker, is on compensation for asbestosis, while another asbestosis worker who lived across the street died several years ago of lung cancer.

Bitter

He accepts these tragedies as part of "life in Thetford Mines," but his wife is angry and bitter.

"For years my husband wouldn't go see compensation on his own," she said. "He believed the company clinic when they said he was healthy, even though it was obvious that he was not."

"That's the way it used to be here ... no one wanted to talk about it—instead they'd hide it from each other like it was TB. But the last few years we've been talking more because we realize how many people are affected and we're learning more about the disease."

"Lots of people are still pretending they're healthy," she continued. "They're scared that if they go to the compensation clinic in Montreal, they'll be told to leave the mill and the mine and be demoted like my husband."

"They're worried they may end up a janitor or maybe nothing at all, so they all pretend they're normal and stay home whenever they're feeling sick. Everybody's normal in Thetford Mines!"

One of these "normal people" is Romeo Lachance, a 51-year-old worker who was told he had asbestosis by an independent doctor in Laval more than two years ago.

Lachance has worked in the mill for 35 years, since he was 16, and for the last eight years he has been unable to walk quickly and has had difficulty climbing stairs.

His family doctor suggested he visit the compensation board clinic seven years ago, but Romeo first made his application only two months ago.

"How come?" he says. "Ahhh... that's the \$64,000 question."

He then went on to describe a situation which seems to have dissuaded many Thetford Mines workers from seeking compensation benefits.

"Look, I make \$4.67 an hour now, and it's taken me a long time to get there. If I went to compensation, I'd get maybe a 15-per-cent disability ... worth about \$80 a month."

"Meantime, I might lose my job completely or else I might get switched outside the mill area to who knows what ... a janitor or something. I'd get \$3.63 an hour like that and end up losing over \$200 salary a

month on the deal. All told that's more than a \$100 net loss a month ... that's a lot of money."

"Sure I was stupid not to do it anyway but, you know, I figured that I was still pretty strong and a few more years wouldn't hurt me. I've got lots of friends who've been doing the same thing as me."

"But now," he explains, "I just get tired too easy—I can't even walk fast—and the visit from these American doctors scared me, so I figured I'd better apply for compensation before I killed myself."

Helen Paquet, who keeps compensation records for the CNTU in Thetford Mines, said that in previous years few workers applied for compensation and those who received it could easily be transferred to jobs outside polluted areas.

The CNTU could not provide a yearly breakdown for compensation applications and the Workmen's Compensation Board refused to release the numbers. However, the board said compensation rolls are beginning to swell, largely due to unions encouraging their members to apply.

As a result of this increase, said company spokesmen, there are not sufficient jobs outside the mines and mills for those placed on compensation.

Paquet said most men receiving less than 30-per-cent disability pension are simply shuttled back to the jobs they held before applying to the board.

This happens despite compensation board recommendations that they be shifted to safer areas, she said.

Union demand

One of the current union demands is a guarantee that those receiving compensation will be shifted to less dangerous areas with no drop in salary. In the meantime, they could refuse to return to their old jobs and quit, but as Lachance puts it:

"What else could I do if I quit ... sell peanuts? Come on, I'm 51 and only speak French ... that's it for me, eh?"

Even those who do not work in the industry are constantly reminded of asbestos pollution. Residents point to the asbestos dust that collects between their storm windows, and claim that in the summer a clean car will be streaked with the grey dust within a quarter of an hour.

Dr. Paul Cartier, long-time head of the companies' clinic in Thetford Mines, concedes that he has often found asbestos particles sprinkled on his desk in the morning and admits that the local red-brick public school has been scraped down twice in eight years because it was coated with asbestos dust.

But studies on air pollution levels in the town and their effects have not been done.

Haigh feels these levels may well be hazardous due to two mountainous slag heaps of dust on the outskirts of town and recommends long-term study.

Dr. Michel Lesage, newly appointed medical adviser for the company clinic, though less perturbed, agrees on the need for general air pollution tests in the town.

But for the young of Thetford Mines, the air they have grown up with is tolerable, as is the water, despite asbestos levels which led the Mount Sinai doctors to drink only bottled water throughout their stay.

It is the conditions in the mines and mills that frighten the young.

As Nazare Paquet, union head at Carey Canadian mine, put it: "Working in the mines used to be the best thing that could happen to a kid. Now a days as soon as they get a chance, they get out."

Three young men sitting in the Maltonniere tavern respond immediately when the subject of asbestosis is brought up.

None of the men, aged 25 to 32, works in the mines, but all of their fathers did. One died of lung cancer after 30 years in the mines. He was 46. Another quit work because of ill health, but never applied for compensation.

"Fin!"

A third is presently collecting 45-per-cent compensation, and his son, Yves Beaudoin, says simply that he is "fini."

"The company clinic gave him and his two working partners an A in their physical every year, but all three of them decided to go to Montreal anyway one year. My father received 45-per-cent compensation — 45 per cent — and his two friends received 10 per cent. What does that tell you?"

"Me," he says angrily, and his friends nod in agreement. "I'd never work in the mines. I'm unemployed now and even when I'm working I make less than I would as a miner, but at least I can breathe."

"Sure we have friends who've worked in the mines, but nobody stays for more than a few months at a time . . . even that's too much if you ask me. I'd never work there after what happened to my father and his friends . . . never."



Raoul Larochelle: "Me, I quit the mines in 1940 . . . otherwise I'd be dead, too."



Romeo Lachance, left, has asbestosis but he asks: "What else could I do if I quit . . . sell peanuts?" Yves Beaudoin says: "I'd never work in the mines."

Staff Photos by Gordon Beck



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CAUSE OF THE TROUBLE: Asbestos ore fibres, which have been blamed for asbestosis and lung abnormalities in asbestos workers, are examined by George Dionne, one of hundreds of Thelford Mines workers to undergo a health survey.