L'amiante la santé et la collectivité

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MONTRÉAL, QUÉ
CANADA

Asbestos, Health and Society

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CLOSING REMARKS
MADE ON MAY 27, 1982
BY THE SECRETARY GENERAL OF
THE WORLD SYMPOSIUM ON ASBESTOS
DR. JACQUES DUNNIGAN

Here we are, at the close of these three days of intensive discussion, during which we have heard from the podium and from the floor, statements and evidence presented by renowned doctors and scientists, as well as viewpoints expressed by labour and industry, and also by government representatives who in the final analysis are ultimately responsible for the decisions which govern our society.

It would indeed be presomptuous to attempt today to draw up a definitive evaluation of these 22 hours of presentations and debates which probably took place in the course of this symposium, which without any doubt constitutes the most important international multidisciplinary gathering ever convened to take a global look at the Asbestos situation in the world today.

I will not even venture to try to present all the particular and specific conclusions which could be drawn about the seven main issues which were put before us.

In the weeks and months ahead, and especially in view of the eventual publication of these proceedings to be made available to the largest possible audience throughout the world, many will undoubtedly be engaged in the exercise of assessing how this symposium can help to better define the present and prepare the future.

This will not be an easy task; but those involved in it will have the benefit of time to reflect upon it.

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I do not have such an opportunity today. Time is needed for ideas and concept to settle, and you understand that I am making these remarks with due care and circumspection.

Nonetheless, it seems to me, some observations can be made, which in the course of this meeting emerged with enough strength to allow me to make what I would call pre-conclusions.

In the first place, the main observation which can be made is that the asbestos issue has given rise to major differences of opinion and appreciations within all the groups represented here, on most of the questions discussed. I am not sure yet if these differences of opinion generate the complexity of the problems, or if it is the complexity of the problem which generates these differences of opinion.

Whatever the case may be, there seems to be however a wide consensus on some essential points. Thus the collective wisdom of this international assembly does not advocate banning of asbestos as the solution, for reasons which, by the way, may not be identical for all concerned, and certainly with varying degrees of conviction.

Having set aside banning as the solution, this assembly has nevertheless issued numerous warnings and defined requirements as regards to the implementation and the systematic and concerted application of a rigourous and continual control of asbestos from its mining to its ultimate end-use in the form of products and various applications, through all phases of its processing, transport, manufacturing and handling.

It is obvious that research is far from complete. Much effort and time will be needed to fill the numerous gaps in our knowledge. Indeed, we need to delve more extensively in the important and difficult problem of understanding the mechanism of cancerogenic processes.

The analysis of epidemiological data must be pursued, so that the decisions of tomorrow can be made in the light of data that are more recent and extensive than what is available today, especially with regards to the evaluation of risk at low levels of exposure, in the occupational and para-occupational settings as well as in the general environment.

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Concerning the general population, I think we can say that with the present stage of knowledge on the real and identifiable biological effects, no scientific or medical evidence allows us to conclude that there is a risk for the general public using asbestos-based products, or that such risk, if any, would be greater than the multiple other risks encountered by the citizens of a modern society in their daily lives.

However, we must continue to be vigilant as regards the use of asbestos-based products. But we must not let the public be unduly alarmed.

We have also seen that the problem of asbestos is further complicated by the fact that, maybe unfortunately, there is no unique substitute for the numerous applications of asbestos and also by the fact that the substitutes proposed raise as many unresolved questions today as asbestos did 50 years ago.

Finally, it can be observed that here, as in any society, there are schools of thought that will never agree on the notion of a socially acceptable risk. Each must therefore draw his own conclusions.

What we know today, after these three days of debate, is that the main question put to this symposium, "Can society live with asbestos?", does not have a simple answer. There is a wide range of opinion between the "no, but" and the "yes, but".

We must therefore resign ourselves to the fact that there will never be a simple answer to the following question:

> "What benefit does society derive from a behaviour or a technique, or a product, as compared to its cost or the risk involved?"

In our societies where the responsibility of individuals, groups and nations becomes increasingly necessary, the widest and most objective information must be made available so that nations, groups and individuals may take decisions in a responsible manner.

If this first multidisciplinary symposium has contributed to the dissemination of extensive but contradictory information, I will be happy to close these proceedings on an optimistic perspective.