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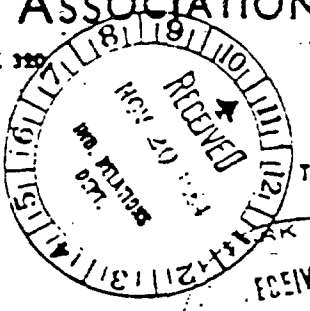

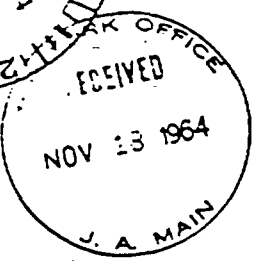

November 16, 1964

Mr. M.J. Messel,
President,
Quebec Asbestos Mining Association,
Black Lake, Quebec.

BRIEF REPORT (NON-SCIENTIFIC) RE
CONFERENCE ON BIOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF ASBESTOS
HELD IN NEW YORK, OCTOBER 19, 20 and 21, 1964

Dear Sir:

As you well know, the above Conference was sponsored by the New York Academy of Sciences and the chairmen of the Conference were Dr. L.J. Selikoff and Dr. J. Churg of The Mount Sinai Hospital, New York.

It was easily noticeable that, at the opening of the Conference on Monday morning, there was a feeling of uneasiness about the pre-conference articles which appeared in the press in USA and Canada. It was also apparent that the medical experts from Great Britain and other European countries were fully aware of this pre-conference publicity.

The first session began with an exposé on the asbestos materials in modern technology. This was one of two sessions where someone (N.W. Henory) from a member company of our Association was invited to present a paper. This contribution dealt with the occurrences and major uses of asbestos throughout the world. Emphasis was placed especially on the differences between chrysotile, crocidolite and amosite.

Following this introductory discussion, several papers were presented on the occurrence of asbestosis and dust measuring techniques. It was pointed out that the enormous rise in production and industrial use of asbestos during the past fifty years has resulted in widened exposure to asbestos dust from an increased number of workers. Dr. Selikoff indicated that in a study of some 1,500 asbestos

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insulation workers in New York - New Jersey metropolitan area, it had been found that, during the past twenty years, sixty of them had died of lung cancer, probably a complication of asbestosis, said he. Many other workers revealed that they were affected by asbestosis. Obviously, Dr. Selikoff's conclusion was that health and lives were endangered by their occupations.

Dr. W.J. Smithers from England also reported an increasing incidence of lung cancer in certain factory workers located in London. A certain Dr. Thomson from Africa also reported that, in a survey made among urban dwellers in Cape Town, South Africa, and Miami, Florida, the results showed an increase in the occurrence of the cancer of the pleura, probably due to inhaling of asbestos dust as a new form of air pollution. In our opinion, some of the conclusions drawn were based on probabilities and lacked certain important distinctions as to the origin and type of asbestos bodies.

During the afternoon session, there was a bit of an incident that took place. It had been discovered that three press releases (one for each day of the Conference) had been prepared in advance under the apparent authorship of the New York Academy of Sciences public relations department and were available at the press desk near the Conference Hall. This, together with the pre-conference articles, created a great deal of discontentment, so much so, that the British delegation registered a very strong protest during the afternoon meeting. This protest took strong exception to the sensational tone of the press releases prepared for public consumption. These releases, was it stated, placed emphasis on those aspects of the papers presented for which there was the least scientific backing and which seemed calculated to arouse unjustified fear among the general public. The statement on the sensational summaries of the deliberations of the Conference prepared in advance of the actual presentations met with applause and agreement by at least 90% of the delegates. The subject came up again the next day in the form of a resolution, at which time Dr. Selikoff had to speak in defense of the Academy for its method of handling the publicity on the Conference. The objection was especially bitter against the headlines of the press releases. They went like this:

a) HIGH INCIDENCE OF CANCER DEATHS FOUND IN ASBESTOS WORKERS; ASBESTOS IN ENVIRONMENT ALSO THREATENS CITY DWELLERS

b) ASBESTOS LINKED TO SEVERAL MALIGNANCIES; MAY PAVE WAY FOR CIGARETTE-INDUCED CANCER

c) SCIENTISTS CITE GROWING ASBESTOS HAZARDS; ASK FOR SAFETY MEASURES AND FURTHER STUDY

Fortunately no newspaper reproduced these articles.

It must be pointed out that some very well prepared papers were presented, especially on the 2nd and 3rd days. One of these papers presented by Dr. A.C. Vigliani of University of Milan on asbestos exposure in Northern Italy was especially interesting, since it showed considerable reduced occurrence of asbestosis and pulmonary malignancy in local asbestos workers as compared with those of Ehgland. It must be added that Dr. Selikoff and his associates gave very lively presentations of their papers. Dr. Cartier was able during the second day of the discussion to briefly indicate differences in the frequency and type of pulmonary neoplasia among Canadian asbestos mine workers.

Up to that moment, the discussions as a whole had been clouded with a certain pessimism. Fortunately, at the dinner held in the Academy building on Tuesday evening, Dr. J.C. Gilson did a masterful job in presenting a complete picture of the asbestos industry throughout the world. He pointed out that the asbestos industry had in its balance sheet, not only items on the debit side but considerably more on the credit side. He gave a lively description of the growth of the industry in recent years and its importance in the life of people in every country of the world. His remarks brought all the previous discussions in their true perspective and from then on, the debate was much more friendly and co-pperative.

One of the statements brought forth by Dr. Gilson in a later discussion, was that the increasing occurrence of cancer among asbestos workers was ironically, a reflection of their improved working conditions and longer life span. It is obvious that today, the medical profession knows more about cancer and as a result, the latter is diagnosed and recorded as such in the case of more people with a normal life span. It was pointed out that lung cancers caused by inhalation of asbestos dust appeared twenty to forty years

after onset of exposure; therefore, the incidence should eventually drop sharply, since improvements in working conditions and preventive measures have been taken over the past twenty years.

In his paper given towards the end of the Conference, Dr. K.W. Smith of Johns-Manville Corporation, stated that it was important to find out which kind of asbestos fibres would be more or less harmful within the human body; in addition, the geographical location of the asbestos deposit seems to be an important factor to the incidence of the disease. Attention should be placed on certain impurities or contaminants associated with various types of asbestos fibres. Distinctions should also be made in the definition of asbestos workers and environmental working conditions.

In ending Mr. Sabourin pointed out that, although the medical experts from Quebec had not been asked to actively participate in the Conference, i.e. present papers, their records as well as those of the various asbestos mining companies were opened to any scientist interested. We do not wish, said Mr. Sabourin, to impose ourselves but we feel that we have a great deal of experience to offer in this field, since our records date as far back as 1927. The undersigned knows that the advice given by Dr. Sabourin was well taken and that everyone in the audience was aware of his knowledge and competence in the field of pneumoconiosis, etc. Mr. Sabourin has advised that he would submit a more complete (scientific) account of the various exchanges that took place during those three days within and without the premises of the Conference meetings.

Paul-A. Filteau

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cc: Messrs. A.L. Penhale — Asbestos Corporation Ltd.
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