

Banning asbestos in Canada

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The context

- Canada was the first global scale asbestos producer, and by some estimates well over half of the asbestos ever used in the world came from Canada, mainly Quebec.
- Asbestos played a major role in the Western World's industrial economy, especially from the 1930s to the 1970s. It contributed to the war effort, in naval vessels, tanks and many other settings, especially for heat insulation.

Context - 2

- The roots of the asbestos industry go very deep. In Quebec, it was a strategic presence for a century; and it found its way into the psyche of the Silent Revolution generation through the 1949 Asbestos Strike.
- Challenging the asbestos industry in Quebec could be career ending.
- All three major national political parties supported the industry for a long time.

Context - 3

- The hazards of asbestos have been widely known for decades, including in Ontario where diseases from the Johns-Manville asbestos cement factory made headlines in the mid-1970s, leading to the Dupre Commission later in the decade.
- Meanwhile asbestos producers were driven into bankruptcy by thousands of lawsuits in the US.

Context - 4

- The general response in Canada was tighter regulation of exposure levels, and combined with growing economic costs and risks of using asbestos, its prevalence has plummeted since the 1970s. However, lots of left over asbestos is still in the work and home environments.
- Progress has been made on many fronts since then; however, Canada and the US have still not banned asbestos.

Context - 5

- Only in this century has the tide really started to turn in favour of a Canadian ban.
- The NDP and Liberals changed their national policies on asbestos five or six years ago, culminating in the historic speeches by Jack Layton and Tom Mulcair on Parliament Hill in May 2010 at a rally sponsored by the National Building Trades.

Context - 6

- The shift accelerated in Quebec after that, led by brave researchers and public health officials who were willing to take an unpopular stand – including Dr. Fernand Turcotte, who joined the national ban asbestos campaign.
- Finally the PQ government in 2012 officially ended life support for the asbestos industry and shifted its focus to transition.

Results of four decades of asbestos campaigns in Ontario

- 1993 – approval of schedule 4 to the Workers' Compensation Act (now Workplace Safety and Insurance Act). Irrebuttable presumption of work relatedness for asbestosis and mesothelioma.
- This facilitated compensation to workers and families facing the devastating consequences of preventable asbestos exposure.

Results of campaigns -2

- **2005 – Ontario Regulation 278/05, Asbestos on construction projects and in buildings and repair operations.**
- This and previous regulations and initiatives across Canada have resulted in remediation of asbestos hazards in many major exposure situations.

Results of campaigns -3

- Resources to OHCOW and Office of the Worker Adviser to deal with asbestos disease cases – especially in Sarnia.
- Resulted in detecting more than 400 lung cancers and mesotheliomas in that city alone. Over 1000 Sarnia workers involved in ongoing low dose CT scan screening.
- Additional resources were provided by WSIB to address other disease clusters across Ontario.

Results of campaigns (4)

- World leading Mesothelioma Program at University Health Network Hospital. Some promising results starting to emerge. Including workers who have survived long past what was previously thought possible. Vital funding has been provided by building trades unions and employers and the Canadian Mesothelioma Foundation
- Initiatives to improve detection of asbestos related lung cancers

National and international

- Decades long campaign to end Canadian mining and export of asbestos ended in 2012 with success in Quebec. **NO ASBESTOS HAS BEEN MINED SINCE.**
- Over 50 countries have banned asbestos
- A small minority of countries continue to support use of asbestos and to oppose listing in the Rotterdam convention
- Extensive use persists in some countries
- There is still much to do

Current situation in Canada

- In spite of significant progress, asbestos products are still being imported and used in Canada.
- Increasing quantities of asbestos brake pads. Competing with high quality asbestos free brake pads made in Guelph
- Significant use of asbestos cement pipe
- And yes, apparently some children's crayons ...

Now is the time for a Canadian ban on asbestos

- Globe and Mail – July 2015 – “The next logical steps are a ban on asbestos and a comprehensive plan for its safe removal from homes, schools, office buildings and cars.”
- Toronto Star – July 2015 – “Providing accurate warnings is a useful first step. But what’s really needed is a total ban, coupled with a national asbestos removal program.

A Canadian ban

- There has never been broader societal consensus for an asbestos ban.
- As one example, three party agreement on a recent Ontario private member's bill to ban asbestos brake pads.
- A ban is supported by public and environmental health organizations, asbestos disease victims and their families, labour organizations, employers and many concerned Canadians.

A comprehensive asbestos strategy

- A comprehensive ban on asbestos. Including time limited transition plans for elimination of any current asbestos products and just transition for affected workers and communities.
- A registry of all buildings and other current exposure locations, accompanied by a plan for remediation and removal of the asbestos from those locations.

Asbestos strategy - 2

- A registry of Canadians exposed to asbestos and their health status, to support screening and early medical intervention to minimize health impacts.
- An asbestos disease health network, to ensure the best possible research and innovation in health care.
- Compensation fund for asbestos disease victims where an occupational link cannot be established.

Asbestos strategy - 3

- Canadian research and innovation on alternatives to asbestos, providing this technology to other countries.
- Support a global ban on asbestos, including support for listing chrysotile asbestos under the Rotterdam Convention.
- Enshrine the asbestos strategy in law, including annual reporting on progress.

Thank you

- To the many asbestos disease victims and their families who have bravely stepped forward to tell their stories and raise awareness – among many others, Eddy Cauchi, Ray and Sandy Kinart, Stacy Cattran and Leah Nielsen, the Von Palleske family, Eudice Goldberg, John Nolan, the Cassidy family, Kathleen Mullen and Pat Martens.

Thank you - 2

- To the activists who have campaigned, in some cases for decades. Just to name a few, Jim Brophy, Mark Parent, Kathleen Ruff, Larry Stoffman, Sarah Miller, Fe de Leon and Laura Lozanski.
- To civil society leaders such as Mayor Mike Bradley of Sarnia, and the many elected politicians who have made asbestos a priority.

Thank you - 3

- To organized labour as the national, provincial and local levels
- To the employers who have promoted a ban and embraced alternatives
- To regulators who have protected workers through effective enforcement and to the prevention community.
- To journalists who have told the story so powerfully, including Martin Mittelstaedt, Melissa Fung and Tavia Grant.

Thank you - 4

- To committed health professionals, too many to mention, and the amazing team at the University Health Network and other leading centres in Canada.
- To public health organizations, especially the Canadian Cancer Society, Lung Association and Canadian Medical Assn.
- And finally to researchers and research organizations, including IARC and its asbestos panel members, OCRC, CAREX,