OPINION ONLINE STAR
Asbestos coverup 24/1/2011 P19

Freedom-of-information researcher Ken Rubin says Canadian authorities have tried to hide their own work at piecing together an overview of where and how Canadians were exposed to chrysotile asbestos. His commentary is at thestar.com/opinion.

th

Research data on asbestos exposure hidden

Article

Published 1 hour 29 minutes ago

Ken Rubin

Canada's role in exporting asbestos, a known carcinogenic product no longer used in this country, and in supporting an international lobbying effort for its use, has been appalling.

Even more disgraceful, Canadian authorities have tried to hide their own work at piecing together an overview of where and how Canadians were exposed to chrysotile asbestos. That government-sponsored research, begun back in 2007, reviewed the many places — mines, office buildings, school gyms, homes — where the risk of exposure to asbestos dust was high and could cause serious health problems and death.

For more than three years, the Canadian government delayed responding to my access-to-information request on its risk-assessment work on asbestos exposure, and for nearly two years hid its own secret, internal reworking of the original commissioned research.

This is just the latest instance in more than 25 years of government foot-dragging on releasing asbestos-related information. Earlier revelations include:

- How the Canadian and Quebec governments poured millions into a Canadian-based international lobby group, the Chrysotile (formerly Asbestos) Institute.
- How in the 1980s Canadian taxpayers' dollars were used to lobby against the United States Environmental Protection Agency's proposed asbestos ban.
- How the Chrysotile Institute teamed up with Canadian embassy officials to promote the "safe" use overseas of asbestos in countries like India and, when necessary, getting ministers or prime ministers to intervene when countries threatened to ban its use.
- How other asbestos-exporting countries like Russia agreed to keep higher priced Canadian asbestos exports flowing as long as Canada continued to support the international lobbying efforts of the Chrysotile Institute.
- How officials in Natural Resources Canada and Health Canada engaged in efforts to ensure that asbestos products would continue to be regarded as exportable, despite asbestos being a known carcinogenic. One National Resources official who handled the asbestos file for years had, in fact, been the first president of the Asbestos Institute. An official still employed by Health Canada lobbied against the WHO position to ban asbestos exports.

But exposing such deceptive practices on how the Canadian government dealt with this lethal product, which has been banned for use in Canada, has not as yet meant the end of asbestos exports.

And now we learn that Health Canada officials went to some length to suppress and disown a 2008-09 asbestos risk-assessment study the department commissioned from Risk Science International (RSI), a University of Ottawa partner. The study cost taxpayers $24,075.

The RSI study findings showed where higher exposure to asbestos contamination existed in Canada. You would think that the federal government would have wanted to act immediately to confirm and correlate these sites as the sources of thousands of asbestos deaths in Canada.

Instead of stalling release of the study's results, the government could have undertaken remediation work at identified exposure sites to stop further asbestos-related deaths. More asbestos-removal projects like the one on Parliament Hill could have been completed by now.

Health Canada officials tried to dissuade me from getting these reports by offering to substitute other data. And they never bothered listing the RSI/University of Ottawa study in violation of their so-called "proactive disclosure" rules. Nor did the University of Ottawa list this RSI report on its website.

The 2008 RSI study was a massive effort to collect national evidence on asbestos exposure and should have been shared with the public. In fact, access records indicate that Health Canada added the RSI findings to its asbestos-exposure file in 2009 but then kept its revised version on asbestos exposure secret, too. Some asbestos-exposure data remains hidden to this day because it is in the hands of private companies and the government did not demand its release.

The newly elected Parliament should ban all asbestos exports and kill any revitalization of this industry, including the proposed reopening of an asbestos mine in Quebec.

Doing what is right would finally end this country's shameful double-dealing and secrecy on asbestos.

Ken Rubin *is an Ottawa-based public interest researcher. He can be reached at* ***kenrubin.ca***