



Blogs » Docs Talk

## Who's keeping the Canadian asbestos industry alive?

*By Dr. Kapil Khatter*

The Canadian chrysotile asbestos industry has been finding it tough lately to sell the whole exporting death thing. I guess it shouldn't be surprising. Who wants to buy a toxic, cancer-causing product? The industry works hard to promote chrysotile as a safer asbestos, but the [International Agency for Research on Cancer](#) and the [World Health Organization](#) remind us that all types of asbestos are cancer-causing and harmful when inhaled. Canadians seem to have heard that message, as Canadian asbestos is rarely used here.

Still, there is demand for asbestos elsewhere, especially in poorer countries. India is Canada's best customer, and we also ship tonnes of asbestos to countries like Indonesia, Thailand, Mexico, and Sri Lanka. Why? Because asbestos is useful. Heat- and chemical-resistant, it is used in brake pads, vinyl flooring, and construction materials. Asbestos is also cheap.

But how does a developed country like Canada, with its developed-country wages, compete in an asbestos market dominated by less-developed countries? The number of Canadian mines and miners has dwindled. Quebec's Jeffrey Mine has filed for bankruptcy protection. How does what's left of the industry keep going?

### **A little help from our friends**

The Canadian asbestos industry, it appears, is getting a lot of help from its friends. According to federal government documents obtained through access to information requests, asbestos prices are kept artificially high in order to keep Canada in business. The documents, [quoted in the Globe & Mail](#), claim that other asbestos exporting countries could undercut Canada but allow the Canadian industry to survive for its "leadership and credibility in promoting the safe use of chrysotile."

The industry has a large group of friends at home as well: you, me, and the rest of Canadian taxpayers. Our federal government gives the [Chrysotile Institute](#), the industry's lobby group, \$250,000 in public funds every year to promote the sale of asbestos and its "controlled use." [More than \\$20 million has been handed to the institute since 1984.](#)

And now the owner of the Jeffrey Mine, one of the two remaining Canadian mines, is asking for a loan guarantee of \$58 million to allow the company to extract 200,000 tonnes of asbestos a year. The Quebec government is deciding whether to guarantee the loan to keep the Jeffrey Mine in operation now that new investors have been found.

## Government lobbying

But it's not just financial aid that helps keep Canadian asbestos shipping. The federal government uses its political capital to protect and promote the asbestos trade. In 1999, Canada challenged France's ban on asbestos and asbestos-containing products at the World Trade Organization, but lost, then lost again on appeal. Both decisions found chrysotile asbestos to be a dangerous, cancer-causing substance that France had the right to ban for health reasons.

At the international Strategic Approach to Integrated Chemicals Management negotiations, Canada made the protection of asbestos exportation its main priority. Adopted in 2006, the agreement called for the phasing out of harmful chemicals by the year 2020. The Canadian delegation didn't think this should apply to asbestos. The Natural Resources Canada lawyer appointed to the delegation had a mission to protect Canada's chrysotile exports. Even American delegates, obviously intent on weakening the agreement, shook their heads at Canada's stubborn defence of asbestos.

In autumn 2008, Canada also blocked the listing of chrysotile asbestos under the Rotterdam Convention, which only requires exporting countries to notify importing countries when a potentially dangerous substance is being sold to them. Canadian officials teamed up with other exporting and importing countries to prevent even that toothless measure.

The Canadian asbestos industry has friends, of course, in the countries it exports to. While governments like India's provide cover by denying asbestos is dangerous, importers and manufacturers agree to the "controlled use" of Canadian asbestos, then recklessly expose Indian workers, providing no safety equipment. Many workers report never being told of the risks of working with asbestos. When workers are told, they sometimes have to choose between an unsafe job and no job at all.

## A tipping point

Even with all this help, the Canadian asbestos industry remains fragile. Recent criticism from public health physicians in Quebec and from high-profile health organizations have made Canadians more aware of our asbestos hypocrisy. Canadian Cancer Society affirms that all forms of asbestos cause cancer. The Canadian Medical Association passed a resolution calling for a ban on the sale and export of asbestos. The argument that asbestos can be used safely has been debunked by expert opinion and media investigation.

Efforts continue to get the federal government to end funding for the Chrysotile Institute, to keep the Quebec government from guaranteeing the Jeffrey Mine loan and to stop Canadian asbestos mining and export. Unions and other Ban Asbestos Canada organizations are also working toward a just transition for asbestos workers to other paid jobs.

You can help. Write letters to Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Premier Jean Charest asking them to ban Canadian asbestos. Your letters can help prevent cancer and other asbestos-related disease.

To read what *The Lancet*, the world's leading medical journal, has to say about Canada's asbestos industry, download this PDF.

*Dr. Kapil Khatter is a family physician in Ottawa and President of the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment (a member of Ban Asbestos Canada). He was a founding board*

*member of Health Care Without Harm and sits on the federal government's Environmental Assessment Working Group, which looks at pharmaceutical and cosmetic ingredients in the environment. Dr. Khatter completed his medical training at McGill University and has a master's degree in environmental studies from York University.*

December 8, 2010

<http://www.davidsuzuki.org/blogs/docs-talk/2010/12/whos-keeping-the-canadian-asbestos-industry-alive/?q=print>