

This is the unedited version of a column which appeared in *Australian Doctor* in 2004. Minor changes may have been made to the published piece.

Media Bites: Asbestos - a tourist destination to avoid

In the late 1800s, when the people of eastern Quebec realised the money that could be made from what was known locally as “cotton rock”, they decided to name their settlement after it.

They never could have guessed what it might mean, more than 100 years later, to come from a town called Asbestos.

Nor could they have anticipated the scorn that would one day be heaped on their country as a result of the industry they helped found.

While asbestos is currently hitting Australian headlines, thanks to a NSW inquiry into an apparent attempt by manufacturer James Hardie to avoid its compensation liabilities, some Canadian antics also merit scrutiny.

Canada, one of the world’s largest exporters of chrysotile or white asbestos, has followed in the murky footsteps of the tobacco industry, according to many researchers and health groups.

As markets have dried up in wealthy, safety-conscious countries, the asbestos industry, with the active support of the Canadian Government, has shifted marketing efforts to developing countries.

These are, of course, also the countries least equipped to deal with the hazards involved, making a mockery of the Canadian Government’s insistence that the controlled use of white asbestos is safe.

As a recent Canadian Medical Journal article noted: “Conditions of current asbestos use in developing countries now resemble those that existed in the industrialised countries before the dangers of asbestos were widely recognised.”

India is one of Canada’s largest asbestos markets. The British Medical Journal reported earlier this year that doctors there are under pressure to misdiagnose asbestos-related diseases and to underplay the health impact.

The Asbestos Information Centre in India is running a campaign highlighting the advantages of asbestos products and to "increase awareness of the superior safety attributes of asbestos products over untested alternative materials".

This is in line with the work of Canada's Asbestos Institute, established in 1984 with generous Government and industry funding. Its web site explains how it works to promote safe asbestos use by running training seminars around the world.

Critics put it another way. The International Journal of Occupational and Environmental Health, in its September 2003 theme issue on asbestos, cites many examples of the Institute's lobbying against trade bans and its attempts to convince foreign health departments that research into the dangers of white asbestos is inconclusive (although the WHO holds otherwise).

The Institute had a major defeat three years ago when the World Trade Organisation disallowed an appeal by Canada against France's decision to ban white asbestos.

In a few months time, just as the James Hardie inquiry is likely to be finalising its findings in Sydney, Canada will again be lobbying to block proposed restrictions on asbestos sales to developing countries. With the support of Russia and other pro-asbestos countries, Canada already has succeeded once in blocking the United Nations move, due to be considered again in September.

Ms Laurie Kazan-Allen, founder of the International Ban Asbestos Secretariat, deplores Canada's stance. "The asbestos deaths of millions of foreign workers and consumers count for nothing when the health of the Canadian chrysotile industry hangs in the balance," she says.

Meanwhile, a Quebec tourism agency continues to encourage tourists to visit the huge open pit mine at Asbestos - "you will be astounded by the size of the enormous mechanical shovels and trucks used to extract the ore".

No wonder the people of Asbestos have been talking about changing their town's name.

