

## ***Dangers in the Dust* - inside the global asbestos trade**

LONDON, UK / WASHINGTON, DC: Banned or restricted in more than 50 countries, white asbestos continues to be widely used in China, India, Russia and Brazil, and many developing nations, according to *Dangers in the Dust*, a joint report by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) and the BBC's International News Services.

A multinational network of industry-backed trade associations and institutes, based in Montreal, Mexico City, New Delhi and other cities, has spent nearly US\$100 million (about R760 million) (1) in public and private money since the mid-1980s to promote the international sale and use of white asbestos, or chrysotile, the joint BBC/ICIJ report revealed.

Some experts predict well over a million new deaths by 2030 could be linked to asbestos exposure, with the toll increasingly centred in developing countries. (2)

"Chrysotile and other forms of asbestos.... cause lung cancer and mesothelioma, and that's been known for 50 years," Vincent Coglianò of the World Health Organisation's International Agency for Research on Cancer told the BBC. He adds: "My own personal view is that these risks... are as high as just about any known carcinogen that we have seen except perhaps tobacco smoke ... so the continued export and continued use of chrysotile will increase the incidence of lung cancer and mesothelioma for many decades to come."

Asbestos production is holding steady at around 2 million metric tons per year. Top producers Russia, Canada, and Brazil account for nearly three-quarters of the world supply. (3)

Among the countries that could face the worst health effects, according to this report are: China, the world's top consumer; and India, where asbestos use is growing at the rate of 30% annually. (4)

### **Asbestos a no-no in many countries**

Flame-resistant, strong, and cheap, asbestos was once widely used in North America and Western Europe as a construction material. The mineral is now seldom used there, even in Canada - a country which still exports it. Sale of asbestos in the European Union is almost entirely banned.

As this report reveals, safe and controlled use of asbestos is frequently not achieved in developing countries such as India, Mexico and China, where workplace and environmental standards are not as heavily regulated.

The industry campaign is "totally unethical," says Jukka Takala, director of the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, "Asbestos cannot be used safely." Industry officials say science shows that chrysotile or white asbestos - the form of the mineral used today - is less hazardous than the brown or blue varieties used in the past. The industry also insists that

if properly controlled, white asbestos can be used safely and that substitutes are more expensive and have their own risks.

## A counter view

John Hoskins, a British toxicologist spoke to BBC World Service's Discovery program as part of *Dangers in the Dust*. He says on the health risk of white asbestos: "I think there is an immeasurably small risk, and immeasurably small means it cannot be measured. We cannot demonstrate such a risk I would believe it is so low as to be unimportant compared with the normal risks of life such as risks on road, the risks of food poisoning - risks in developing countries particularly of dirty water and poor sewage facilities."

He adds: "I think the people who would like to ban chrysotile asbestos are actually committing economic damage, because you have a cheap product which does a good job and if you remove that then you are denying people the chance of having that particular material - this does not matter particularly in the UK; it does matter in countries particularly developing countries where the cost of materials is a significant factor in any building operations that go on ..."

*Dangers in the Dust* was broadcast on BBC World Service (radio), BBC World News (television), and [bbc.com/news](http://bbc.com/news) yesterday, Wednesday 21 July and will be published on ICIJ.org and in ICIJ's partner publications worldwide.

Read full coverage of the joint ICIJ/BBC investigation into the global asbestos trade [here](#). BBC coverage can be read [here](#).

[1] See *Dangers in the Dust* overview, Jim Morris, International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, <http://www.publicintegrity.org/investigations/asbestos/articles/entry/2183>.

[2] See, for example, Dr. Joseph LaDou, *The Asbestos Cancer Epidemic*, Environmental Health Perspectives [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/14998741](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/14998741); and *Asbestos in Developing Countries*, Joshi TK, Gupta RK, International Journal of Occupational Medicine [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/15212222](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/15212222)

[3] [minerals.usgs.gov/minerals/pubs/commodity/asbestos/myb1-2008-asbes.pdf](http://minerals.usgs.gov/minerals/pubs/commodity/asbestos/myb1-2008-asbes.pdf)

[4] Russia source: [minerals.usgs.gov/minerals/pubs/commodity/asbestos/mis-2007-asbes.pdf](http://minerals.usgs.gov/minerals/pubs/commodity/asbestos/mis-2007-asbes.pdf); India

Source: 30% figure from interview by Murali Krishnan/ICIJ with Asbestos Cement Products Manufacturers' Association.

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