CORRESPONDENCE

Scientific objectivity and the chrysotile controversy

The British Journal of Industrial Medicine has been used to promote the interests of the Asbestos Institute, of which the longtime Director for Health and Environment, Janice Dunnigan, has been an officer.1 The Institute has also authored a letter on chrysotile asbestos (1993;50:862-3). This letter includes the author's summary of a paper presented at a symposium but not yet published, which Dunnigan said found no chrysotile was the main cause of asbestos workers who used their chrysotile products; and asbestos mining and manufacturing interests would very much like to prevent their remaining market countries from adopting policies that favor the use of chrysotile.

The international re-evaluation of the case against chrysotile that Dunnigan called for is now underway. The International Programme on Chemical Safety (IPCS), an agency of the World Health Organization, has selected a group to prepare a report on chrysotile that is so loaded in favor of asbestos interests that it has been denounced by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, Collegium Ramazzini, and Dr Philip Landrigan at the Mt Sinai School of Medicine in New York. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health took the occasion to cite corporate influence on IPCS reports on other substances in the past and announces its withdrawal from participation in IPCS activities.2 The Collegium refused to be involved in a group that will not provide for the preparation of the IPCS report on chrysotile, and urged that IPCS defer development of this report "prepared by scientists with close ties to the asbestos industry."

It is remarkable that debate over the carcinogenicity of chrysotile could be prolonged anymore. But it is a hopeful sign that independent scientists and participating United States institutions are taking unprecedented steps to protect worker health concerns about the scientific objectivity of the IPCS criteria document on asbestos.3

J. CASTLEMAN
1725 LINDEN AVENUE BALTIMORE, MD 21217, USA

Dust exposure and mortality in chrysotile mining, 1910-76

Editor,—The final issue of the BJM included a thoughtful essay by David Muir Christmas.4 It was concluded the Editor’s Choice series with the 1980 paper by Corbett McDonald et al on the Canadian chrysotile miners’ experience.5 There is the danger that the general reader will believe that there was only one victim in the polemic games that were played in the asbestos field. A statement out of context such as this is an example of a form of bias that Mudford and Selikoff required to be reviewed. I discussed this in 1974 with Margaret Becklake, who was McDonald’s colleague at McGill, and we agreed on the desirability of such a rapprochement. So long as the experts were seen to be at loggerheads and trivialised, there could be inertia in developing better worker protection. Some correspondence survives between the two principal polemicists, John Gilson, who offered his services to help set up the scientific review and override the division. At one stage a meeting was to take place between Mudford and Selikoff at a neutral site in Albany to initiate collaboration. Alas! It never came off. Publication of the McDonald/Selikoff/Gilson correspondence would be of considerable interest but also sequence scientists deemed to be on opposing sides, were both demonised or besmirched as served the polemicists. In 1974 it was apparent that for a more confident understanding of the dose responses of asbestos exposure, the data collected by Corbett McDonald and by Irving Selikoff required to be reviewed. I discussed this in 1974 with Margaret Becklake, who was McDonald’s colleague at McGill, and we agreed on the desirability of such a rapprochement. So long as the experts were seen to be at loggerheads and trivialised, there could be inertia in developing better worker protection. Some correspondence survives between the two principal polemicists, John Gilson, who offered his services to help set up the scientific review and override the division. At one stage a meeting was to take place between Mudford and Selikoff at a neutral site in Albany to initiate collaboration. Alas! It never came off. Publication of the McDonald/Selikoff/Gilson correspondence would be of considerable interest but also sequence scientists deemed to be on opposing sides, were both demonised or besmirched as served the polemicists.  

The introduction also stated that "McDonald’s work over the years . . . laid low the fallacy of the notion that a single fibre could cause cancer." Hardly a claim that an epidemiologist would make, but its appearance in a prestigious journal will give it a life of its own and it will be cited henceforth as a fact.

MORRIS GREENBERG
74 NORTH ROAD LONDON W11 7SY

NOTICES

The 14th Asian Conference on Occupational Health; 15-17 October 1994, Beijing, China

The main theme of the 14th Asian Conference on Occupational Health is

Scientific objectivity and the chrysotile controversy.

B I Castleman

*Occup Environ Med* 1994 51: 431
doi: 10.1136/oem.51.6.431

Updated information and services can be found at:
http://oem.bmj.com/content/51/6/431.1.citation

**Email alerting service**

Receive free email alerts when new articles cite this article. Sign up in the box at the top right corner of the online article.

**Notes**

To request permissions go to:
http://group.bmj.com/group/rights-licensing/permissions

To order reprints go to:
http://journals.bmj.com/cgi/reprintform

To subscribe to BMJ go to:
http://group.bmj.com/subscribe/