

SEX, SECRETS AND ASBESTOS LIES

Laurie Kazan-Allen

Presented at the *First Asbestos Conference in Maceio*
Maceio, Brazil, November 2009

For over 100 years, asbestos has been traded as a global commodity. The multinationals which pioneered the industry realized there was much to be gained from cooperation in areas of mutual interest such as: fixing prices, designating spheres of influence, coordinating “scientific” research and promoting core propaganda messages. The fact that the methods industry used were illegal in some countries and immoral in all did not constrain corporate lobbyists in the pursuit of their ultimate goal: turning deadly fibers into hard cash.

An early manifestation (1918) of the asbestos industry’s commercial positioning of their product is the image of Lady Asbestos; this allegorical representation shows asbestos defending civilization from the elements. The underlining message of this advertisement is clear – asbestos is central to our existence. Indeed, this message is still being broadcast by industry propagandists:

Twenty-first Century Propaganda

- **Chrysotile Asbestos Saves Lives.**
International Alliance of Trade Unions “Chrysotile” 2007, Russia
- **Chrysotile You Know it. You Use it.**
Instituto Brasileiro do Crisotila 2007, Brazil
- **Saving Lives with Chrysotile Asbestos¹**
Chrysotile Institute, 2002, Canada

While the rest of the world was glued to their television sets in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center, some people were engaged in working out how the deaths of 2,720 innocent men and women could be exploited for commercial or political gain. On September 14, 2001 an item written by Steve Milloy appeared on Fox News headlined: *Asbestos Could Have Saved Lives*;² it claimed that more people might have been saved if asbestos fireproofing had been used throughout the twin towers. Of course, this was not true: “no standard treatment of the steel, asbestos or otherwise, could have averted the collapse of the towers in the extraordinarily hot and violent blaze.”³

What motivation could there have been for Milloy to make such hurtful⁴ and unhelpful assertions even as the fires continued to smoulder at ground zero?

Who is Steve Milloy?⁵

- the “**junk science**” commentator for FoxNews.com

- the man behind the website: **junkscience.com**⁶
- someone with close financial and organizational ties to oil and tobacco companies; in 2004, he was paid \$126,000 for 15 hours/week by the parent company of tobacco giant Philip Morris;⁷
- someone who does not acknowledge corporate sponsorship or potential conflicts of interest in the prolific articles, letters and statements he issues.⁸

Throughout its long history, the asbestos industry has used its financial muscle and human resources to establish the commercial imperatives, political considerations and public support vital for its survival. Once the dynamics are clear, the industry does what is needed; money is spent to commission “scientific research,” campaign donations are made to friendly politicians and expensive public relations campaigns are mounted. That global asbestos sales continued to increase long after the links between hazardous exposures and cancer were uncovered is testament to the ruthless effectiveness of industry’s long-term strategy, a strategy which can be summed up by the phrase: **asbestos at any cost.**

Who is to Blame?

When it comes to the failure to protect humanity from the asbestos hazard, there is more than enough guilt to go around. Agencies and officials who should have been part of the solution were indeed part of the problem. Civil servants, government officials, trade unionists, representatives of international agencies and medical professionals colluded with asbestos corporations and industry-backed front groups which represented them. In the UK we had The Asbestosis Research Council and The Asbestos Information Committee, in France The Permanent Committee on Asbestos,⁹ in Switzerland The Asbestos Working Circle, in Greece The Hellenic Asbestos and Asbestos Cement Association and in Brazil The Asbestos Study Committee (CEA). The purpose of these organizations and others like them was to ensure that the regulatory and commercial climate in individual countries remained conducive to the interests of asbestos stakeholders.

Although these organizations are long gone, the work they did is carried on nowadays by lobbyists in asbestos producing and using countries such as:

- Canada: The Chrysotile Institute (formerly the Asbestos Institute)
- Russia: The Chrysotile Association (formerly the Asbestos Association)
- China: The Non-metallic Minerals Industry Association
- India: The Asbestos Information Centre, The Asbestos Cement Products Manufacturing Association
- Mexico: The Mexican Institute of Fibro-Industry (Instituto Mexicano de Fibro-Industrias)
- Colombia: The Columbian Fiber Association (Asociacion Colombiana de Fibras)
- Brazil: The Brazilian Chrysotile Institute (Instituto Brasileiro do Crisotila/ IBC) which replaced The Brazilian Asbestos Institute (ABRA)

Least you be in any doubt as to the mission of the Instituto Brasileiro do Crisotila (IBC), documentation circulated at a 2002 meeting of the Asbestos International Association defined the purpose of the IBC, a “new entity for asbestos defense,” as “making the **outright defense** of Chrysotile Asbestos in Brazil.” Could they have been any clearer than that?

For more than 20 years, the (Canadian) Asbestos Institute, latterly renamed the Chrysotile Institute, was at the nexus of global asbestos activity. In a 2002 Report issued by the Asbestos Institute, the organization boasted of its role in:

- facilitating the creation of asbestos associations in Korea, Mexico, Peru, Taiwan and Colombia;
- interceding in national asbestos debates in Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, the Ivory Coast, Lebanon and Vietnam;
- intervening in legislative processes which threatened to impose asbestos regulations in Morocco, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, the Philippines, Brazil and Taiwan.

Asbestos Secrets

Knowing how ruthless global businesses compete for market share: Pepsi v Coke, adidas v nike, Manchester United v. Real Madrid, it may come as something of a surprise for you to learn that 80 years ago, asbestos multinationals – under the leadership of Ernst Schmidheiny (born 1871) from Eternit Switzerland - formed an international cartel to control the asbestos-cement business. This “miniature League of Nations,” as one participant called it “is based upon the principle of mutual help, which now displaces the previous atmosphere of distrust and suspicion.” The arrangements which were put in place created a framework which enabled the big companies to dominate asbestos mining and manufacture worldwide.

Under the cartel’s arrangements, the exploitation of chrysotile asbestos in South Africa was under the control of the British asbestos giant Turner & Newall. In 1941, when Eternit Switzerland wanted to set up an asbestos cement company there, Max Schmidheiny asked T&N for permission. This was granted in a telegram which said simply: "You can go ahead in South Africa." The same year, Schmidheiny progressed plans to set up an asbestos cement company in Osasco Brazil, a territory which “belonged” to Eternit Belgium. With WWII ongoing, Eternit Belgium had other priorities and gave Schmidheiny the green light to proceed in Brazil. The rest is – as we know – history. It seems that as the rest of Europe was embroiled in a life and death struggle against fascism, it was business as usual for the Swiss Eternit Group.

Asbestos Lies

Protecting the sacred image of asbestos has been a core objective for generations of industry spin doctors. As part of the asbestos whitewash, industry lobbyists extol the virtues of asbestos at the same time as downplaying the inconvenient truth that exposure

to asbestos could kill! The lies disseminated throughout global asbestos markets include the following:

Industry Lies

- only blue and brown asbestos are dangerous; **white asbestos (chrysotile) is safe** when used under “controlled conditions;”
- chrysotile-containing products pose no hazard to people who work in or use contaminated buildings; **environmental asbestos exposures are of no consequence;**
- **asbestos cement is safe** as fibers are “locked” into a matrix; asbestos-cement products are indispensable for developing economies;¹⁰
- **there are no safer alternatives to asbestos.**

In the UK the strategy for delivering asbestos propaganda was well-honed, expensively resourced and specifically targeted. Sometimes, however, they slipped up. In the early 1950s, the slogan: “*If it’s too hot to handle, use asbestos*” was printed on a calendar that featured scantily clad ladies. The fact that the company behind this initiative – the Asbestos Marketing Co. Ltd – was liquidated shortly after the calendar appeared, leads me to suspect that this particular public relations exercise was not a success. Perhaps the excitement generated by these ladies was just too incendiary for the British psyche? Whatever the reason, in the following decades the industry later resorted to less colourful public relations campaigns based on slogans such as:

- *Where would we be without asbestos?*
- *Asbestos – it’s a natural*
- *What would we do without asbestos?*

As with other actions that could affect the reputation of the industry, from the 1970s on British asbestos representatives no longer acted on their own when deciding on the advertising campaigns they would pursue. In 1971 Mr. W. P. Howard, a representative of the (UK) Asbestos Information Committee, highlighted the need for coordinated action to ensure that asbestos stakeholders transmitted the same message in every country. He told industry representatives meeting in London:

“we must project the same positive message in each of our respective countries. This is because the problem is becoming more and more an international one. Science knows no frontiers nor do modern media or communications....”

Two years later, another British spokesman said:

“the problems of asbestos and health move freely across national boundaries, particularly where there is a common language. It is suggested that in the defence of asbestos, the asbestos industries in USA, Canada and the UK are particularly interdependent, and very close collaboration seems necessary.”¹¹

Industry's objectives in the multisectorial¹² and multinational transmission of the same positive messages remain constant - to concentrate attention on the "life-enhancing" properties of asbestos and divert attention from the global asbestos epidemic! Despite all the commercial propaganda, high-level pressure and aggressive posturing by industry bullies, the pro-asbestos lobby has failed. Asbestos is no longer regarded as a fundamental component of civilization; in fact, the fibre once regarded as a magic mineral is now despised as a killer dust.

A consensus on the asbestos hazard has been reached by major international agencies, scores of national governments, independent scientists and medical professionals.¹³ These reputable authorities agree that exposure to asbestos can cause fatal respiratory diseases as well as a number of different cancers. The International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) is in no doubt about the lethal nature of asbestos. In fact, in March 2009, IARC extended its asbestos warnings:

"Epidemiological evidence has increasingly shown an association of all forms of asbestos (chrysotile, crocidolite, amosite, tremolite, actinolite, and anthophyllite) with an increased risk of lung cancer and mesothelioma.... **all forms of asbestos are "carcinogenic to humans"** (Group 1)...

Sufficient evidence is now available to show that **asbestos also causes cancer of the larynx and of the ovary.**"⁵

In 2003, The International Labor Organization and the World Health Organization issued a warning about the dangers of using asbestos-cement:

"Continued use of chrysotile asbestos cement in the construction industry is a particular concern, because the workforce is large, it is difficult to control exposure and in-place materials have the potential to deteriorate and pose a risk to those carrying out alterations, maintenance and demolition."¹⁴

You decide whether to believe IARC, the ILO and the WHO or the asbestos industry spin-doctors.

Case Study: The Mystery of the European Chrysotile Derogation

A classic example of how vested interests implement their commercial agenda is the skull-duggery surrounding the decision taken this year (2009) by European bureaucrats to extend the only asbestos exemption permitted in the European Union (EU). In 1999 when the EU adopted the directive banning asbestos, there was a time-limited derogation for the use of chrysotile asbestos in "diaphragms used for electrolysis in existing installations." This exemption was always intended to be temporary as the Commission Directive 1999/77/EC explained: "the Commission will review this derogation before 1 January 2008..."¹⁵ Somewhere along the line, however, a decision was taken by EU bureaucrats to contravene the intent of the directive. That they did so in secrecy and without consulting at-risk groups belies belief and led to calls by MEPs for them to account for their actions.¹⁶

An article on the website of the European Trade Union Institute explained:

“The derogation for the chemical industry was granted as a result of a lobbying campaign by the multinationals Dow Chemical and Solvay, which obtained support from DG Enterprise (the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Enterprise and Industry) and different governments. It was prepared in a document of July 2007 by DG Enterprise that echoes the arguments of the firms concerned, without providing the slightest critical analysis.”¹⁷

The 2007 document contained the following details:

- the chlor-alkali industry has been the main user of asbestos in electrolysis installations;
- 10,000 people are directly or indirectly employed by the industry;
- the 2 factories in Germany and 1 in Poland are relatively old and have low-voltage installations which produce a “10% caustic soda solution directly useable for downstream chlorohydrin processes for the synthesis of propylene oxide and epichlorohydrin (for epoxy resins).”¹⁸

Amongst those whose active participation should have been encouraged from the very beginning of the review process was the European Trade Union Confederation (ETUC). This did not happen. Indeed, by the time the decision was taken to extend the derogation the opposition of the ETUC and five member states (France, the Netherlands, Italy, Spain and Belgium) had been clearly expressed to the Commission; expressed and ignored.

In light of the EU position that economic considerations should not take precedence over occupational or public health, there is no acceptable reason for the continuation of the asbestos exemption. That such an important decision was taken behind closed doors and with restricted input is an undemocratic act which transgresses the ethos of the EU as well as the democratic rights of its citizens to be protected from deadly substances. It seems highly ironic that Brazil, which is classed as a developing economy, has mandated that asbestos-containing diaphragms used in electrolysis installations producing chlorine be replaced and the EU has not. Clearly the labor inspectorate of São Paulo State values human life more highly than does the European Commission.¹⁹

Concluding Thoughts

Throughout the long and tragic history of the asbestos industry, companies have reaped billions of dollars, rubles, rupees and reias from the commercial exploitation of asbestos. The human cost for the use of this deadly material has been paid by dying individuals, bereaved families and shattered communities. In the full knowledge of the consequences of their actions, asbestos sellers continue to corrupt political systems and pervert the scientific process. Mounting expensive public relations exercises and using highly paid lawyers, they work assiduously to create a favorable opinion of their product and silence opponents. Throughout their careers, asbestos executives bank generous pay checks,

enjoy company perks and look forward to long and fulfilling retirements. Few asbestos workers ever live to see their retirement.

Two of the images which we have seen today reveal how the asbestos industry wished to portray itself in the 20th century. As I conclude this talk, I will leave you with a 3rd image which to me is more representative of the true nature of this industry.

¹ “How many victims has the anti-asbestos hysteria claimed? How many asbestos-free brakes have caused fatal accidents? How many buildings have collapsed after a fire because the asbestos was removed, or because of a refusal to use it? How many people have been stricken with often fatal disease due to a lack of safe drinking water, because ‘benevolent’ individuals demanded the installation of asbestos-free pipes, which were so expensive plans for water systems were cut back by half?... Chrysotile asbestos can save lives.”

“Because of its low cost, it (chrysotile asbestos) is indispensable in building infrastructures that are essential for the life of inhabitants in developing countries, and in providing the equipment needed for healthful living.”

² Milloy S. *Asbestos Could Have Saved Lives*. September 14, 2001.

<http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,34342,00.html>

The nature of the asbestos contained at the World Trade Center is documented in:

Kazan-Allen L. *Asbestos Fallout from September 11*. April 25, 2007.

http://ibasecretariat.org/lka_asb_fallout_sep_11_0407_update.php

³ Glanz J, Revkin A.C. *A Nation Challenged; Haunting Question: Did the Ban on Asbestos Lead to a Loss of Life?* September 18, 2001.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2001/09/18/science/nation-challenged-haunting-question-did-ban-asbestos-lead-loss-life.html?pagewanted=1>

⁴ Milloy said that the U.S. scientist who had reported higher rates of lung cancer and other diseases amongst asbestos workers – Dr. Irvine Selikoff – was “wrong to press the panic button about any use of or exposure to asbestos” and declared that “junk science-fuelled asbestos hysteria” contributed to the September 11 tragedy.

⁵ http://www.ibasecretariat.org/lka_science_not_as_we_know.php

⁶ <http://junkscience.com/Junkman.html>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steven_Milloy

⁷ Kazan-Allen L. *Science, but NOT as we know it*. September 26, 2006.

⁸ Monbiot G. *The denial industry*. The Guardian. September 19, 2006.

⁹ “(The CPA) was, in fact, nothing more than an industry lobby which used scientists, social partners and representatives from the relevant government ministries to promote the policy of the ‘controlled use of asbestos,’ as a viable option to an asbestos ban in France... the CPA was a model of lobbying, communication, manipulation and exploitation and, in the absence of action by the State, spread pseudo-scientific pro-asbestos propaganda which contradicted the state-of-knowledge regarding asbestos hazards prevalent in Anglo-Saxon literature of the time.” This is a rough translation by this author of an extract from the executive summary of the report (page 13), No. 37 Senat: Rapport D’information au nom de la mission commune d’information sur le bilan et les consequences de la contamination par l’amiante <http://www.senat.fr/rap/r05-037-1/r05-037-1.html>

¹⁰ In a 2003 press release from the Asbestos Cement Products Manufacturers Association (India), they said: “Asbestos Cement products are environment friendly and are produced under controlled conditions, which are safe for human beings...” A 2004 headline of a sponsored feature which appeared in The (Indian) Business Standard was: “Asbestos cement used in India is free from all health hazards.” Another piece which accompanied this feature was headline: “*Asbestos substitutes found to have higher risks.*”

¹¹ As asbestos industries have collapsed in developed countries, new partnerships and collaborations have been formed, led initially by Canadian stakeholders and more recently by East European interests.

¹² The various sectors which have a vested interest in the pro-asbestos lobby included: asbestos mining companies, asbestos-cement companies, asbestos and asbestos-cement trade associations, industry-sponsored “unions” and industry-linked “scientists”.

¹³ Kazan-Allen L. *Asbestos Policies of Major International Agencies*. August 27, 2009.

http://ibasecretariat.org/lka_asb_polic_maj_int_agencies.php

¹⁴ Kazan-Allen L. *Asbestos Policies of Major International Agencies*. August 27, 2009.

http://ibasecretariat.org/lka_asb_polic_maj_int_agencies.php

¹⁵ The EU ban on asbestos was enacted by Commission Directive 1999/77/EC;¹⁵ as exemption for the use of diaphragms containing chrysotile asbestos was permitted for “existing electrolysis installations until they reach the end of their service life, or until suitable asbestos-free substitutes become available...” This derogation was to be reviewed by 1 January 2008.

¹⁶ On September 14, 2007 Kartika Liotard, an MEP from the Netherlands, lodged a series of questions with the European Parliament which highlighted the Commission's lack of consultation, due diligence and transparency on the asbestos derogation.

Kazan-Allen L. *EU Asbestos Derogation*. January 8, 2008.

http://ibasecretariat.org/lka_eu_asb_derog_07.php

¹⁷ ETUI. *The European Commission decides to prolong the use of asbestos in certain sectors*. September 22, 2009. <http://hesa.etui-rehs.org/uk/newsevents/newsfiche.asp?pk=1282>

¹⁸ European Commission: Enterprise and Industry Directorate-General. *Review of the Derogation on Chrysotile Asbestos Diaphragms Under Commission Directive 1999/77/EC*. July 2007.

¹⁹ ETUI. *Brazil: major chlorine producer scraps asbestos*. September 20, 2009.

<http://hesa.etui-rehs.org/uk/newsevents/newsfiche.asp?pk=1280>