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## Brazilian Association of Asbestos Exposed Workers: 30 years of fighting for workers' rights

### *Associação Brasileira dos Expostos ao Amianto: 30 anos de luta pelos direitos dos trabalhadores*

The Brazilian Association of Asbestos Exposed Workers (ABREA) was founded in 1995 in the city of Osasco (São Paulo), a territory deeply marked by the effects of the asbestos industry. It emerged as an organization of victims, family members, and activists for collective health, seeking to “provide visibility to the dangers of the use of this mineral by the Brazilian industry, contributing to expand the asbestos debate in the country, in an action for citizenship”<sup>1</sup>. ABREA’s trajectory is intertwined with the construction of the Occupational Health field in Brazil<sup>2</sup>.

Its actions have contributed to transforming how the country approaches and tackles the challenges arising from asbestos exposure<sup>3</sup>. By bringing to the public debate the right to full of information regarding exposure risks and the citizen’s right to act in favor of their own health — a concept known in the Anglophone Global North as “right-to-know & right-to-act”<sup>4-6</sup> — ABREA introduced innovations in the promotion of collective health and socio-environmental action in Brazil<sup>7</sup>. On the occasion of its 30th anniversary in December 2025, the Association was meritoriously awarded the *Salva de Prata* by the São Paulo City Council.

Although asbestos has been recognized by the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) since 1972 as a cause of mesothelioma and other types of cancer, its use persisted for decades. By placing victims at the center of the debate, ABREA challenged the hegemonic discourse of “controlled use,” widely disseminated by the industry, highlighting its ethical, scientific, and sanitary contradictions<sup>8</sup>.

Since its establishment, ABREA’s initially sought to give visibility to diseases caused by asbestos through the organization of workers in the metropolitan region of São Paulo and their referral for medical evaluations at specialized public services<sup>9</sup>. These actions gradually extended to other states, leading to the creation of state-level associations<sup>10</sup>.

This advocacy extended to the legal field, which was fundamental for guaranteeing the rights of workers exposed to asbestos. Efforts resulted in the social security and legal recognition of pleural disease, asbestosis, lung cancer, and mesothelioma, as well as compensation to workers and their families through indemnities, special retirement plans and pensions and access to healthcare services<sup>8,11</sup>.

In the political sphere, ABREA also made significant contributions, together with the Labor Public Prosecutor’s Office (MPT) and other entities, in drafting laws that banned asbestos in Brazilian states, as well as in the national ban on asbestos. The decision by the Federal Supreme Court (STF) in 2017, reaffirmed in 2023, represented a collective victory for social movements, researchers, health professionals, and, notably, ABREA<sup>8,12</sup>.

It is crucial to highlight the setback caused by the reactivation of the Cana Brava Mine, located in the municipality of Minaçu, northern Goiás, which is currently the only active asbestos mine in the Americas. Although unacceptable from health, environmental, and ethical perspectives, the mine remains operational based on a Goiás state law approved in 2019<sup>13</sup>, extracting asbestos exclusively for export. The Supreme Court judgment on this matter has been postponed several times and is currently suspended pending a request for further review by one of the Justices<sup>14</sup>. Meanwhile, hundreds of workers and their families remain exposed to this harmful mineral, compromising their health and shortening their lives.

In the field of public health and epidemiological surveillance, ABREA has also engaged in debates regarding the underreporting of asbestos-related diseases and the need for more comprehensive monitoring systems, such as the Datamianto project. This initiative aims to integrate exposure and morbidity information to strengthen surveillance and comprehensive care for exposed populations<sup>8,15</sup>. The Association also actively participated in local initiatives, such as establishing the occupational health surveillance program for asbestos exposed workers in the state of São Paulo<sup>16</sup>.

ABREA's international projection also deserves mention. The Association has become a global reference by participating in the construction of solidarity and cooperation networks among victims' organizations, unions, scientific institutions, and public health agencies across continents<sup>17,18</sup>. Its role has been recognized by the International Ban Asbestos Secretariat (IBAS), as well as by various partner entities in Europe, Asia, and Oceania<sup>19,20</sup>.

Celebrating ABREA's 30th anniversary is to recall a history of struggle that reaffirms fundamental principles of occupational health: the inseparability between science and social commitment; the centrality of victims' memory and testimony; and the unyielding defense of the right to health and life against economic interests<sup>7,21</sup>. This history must be recognized and disseminated, as the denial of asbestos harmfulness still persists diffusely in our country<sup>6</sup>.

After more than half a century of asbestos production and use, Brazil faces the challenge of managing a vast legacy of asbestos-containing materials still present in buildings, posing potential risks to the population, the environment, and, primarily, workers involved in maintenance, removal, and demolition activities<sup>22</sup>. This challenge is even greater in light of climate change and the occurrence of disasters<sup>23</sup>. The agenda of asbestos removal in Brazil has been addressed by the Jorge Duprat Figueiredo Foundation for Safety and Occupational Medicine (Fundacentro), in collaboration with partners such as Fundação Oswaldo Cruz (Fiocruz), the MPT, and ABREA.

May this celebration also serve as a call to resume the Supreme Court judgment aiming for the definitive closure of the asbestos mine in Minaçu-GO and the development of public policies focused on managing installed asbestos. ABREA's role remains fundamental to strengthening surveillance of exposed populations, protecting workers' health, and amplifying the voice of victims.

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