

Brazil on the road to the elimination of asbestos

The time is appropriate for writing about asbestos use, with the 21st century in full sway and on the eve of the Rio+20 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, scheduled to discuss the planet's sustainability. The success of sustainability hinges on political guidelines to ban and/or reduce harmful chemical substances still in use, including pesticides, benzene, and asbestos. Asbestos is a mineral fiber used in roof tiles, water tanks, brake linings, and other products. Asbestos causes asbestosis (a form of pulmonary fibrosis), pleural plaques, altered lung function, lung cancer, and mesothelioma, a rare, difficult-to-treat cancer of the membrane surrounding the lungs, with poor prognosis.

All types of asbestos are classified by the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) in group 1, known to be "*carcinogenic to humans*"; according to the World Health Organization (WHO) criterion 203, there are no safe levels for exposure to asbestos fibers. Further according to the WHO, the risk must be zero in order to exclude the possibility of cancer in the exposed population, including non-occupational exposure.

WHO estimates some 100,000 deaths/year caused by asbestos worldwide. According to the International Social Security Association (ISSA), 3,500 people in Great Britain die yearly from asbestos exposure. Australia has more than 45 thousand cancer deaths due to asbestos. In Brazil, morbidity and mortality data show an increase in cases of mesothelioma, and a wave of new patients is expected to use public health services.

The ban on asbestos in industrial processes is now a reality in more than 50 countries. Asbestos victims have increasingly sued for their rights. A ruling by the French Supreme Court sentenced employers that exposed workers to asbestos to pay damages and acknowledge asbestos as the cause of the disease. In 2012, the Italian Supreme Court sentenced the owners of an asbestos tile factory to compensate victims and their families.

Brazil is the world's third leading asbestos producer and consumes nearly 1kg of asbestos/inhabitant/year. All this asbestos is found in installations and equipment in different environments, extending outside the workplace and increasing the risk to the environmentally exposed population.

Some States of Brazil such as São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro have passed legislation to ban asbestos, but companies that insist on using asbestos have filed for court injunctions, thus hindering enforcement of the ban. Numerous Bills of Law have circulated in the National Congress since the late 1980s, but unfortunately none of them has met with success.

Through a letter recently published in various news media, a group of Brazilian academic institutions reaffirm that there is no possibility of "safe use" or even "controlled use" of asbestos, and that such concepts are misleading and unfeasible. Thus, the Brazilian government, in its decision-making and civilizing role, has the duty to uphold the Constitution and protect the population's health by enforcing an immediate ban on asbestos.

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