An unholy alliance of industry and science

Any discussion of asbestos always ends on the agonizing question: why wait so long? The first wake-up call was sounded over a century ago. Medical knowledge justified banning asbestos at least as far back as the 1960s. The estimated toll varies with the source, but the fact remains that millions of deaths could have been avoided.

The asbestos industry pleaded that it lacked sufficient data on the risks. The detailed historical study by McCulloch and Tweedale, authors of a series on works on the topic, scotches this claim. Their study focuses on the three biggest Anglo-American firms in the industry: Johns-Manville, Turner & Newall and Cape Asbestos. A fourth – the giant European Eternit group – gets less forensic treatment, as does a fifth major player alongside this “gang of four” – the Soviet State, which accounted for almost 40% of 20th century world asbestos production.

The roots of the defence strategy put in place by the asbestos producers date back to the 1930s, when the first court cases were brought in the United States by workers suffering from asbestosis. The industry went straight onto the front foot, but instead of taking preventive action, decided to steer medical research towards its agenda. In 1935, it set up the Air Hygiene Foundation, which organizes systematic co-operation between business and selected academic institutions in the United States. This set a template for later initiatives that can still be seen operating today across the world. This elaborate construction is about studying working conditions in the industries concerned; putting forward measures for controlled use, including by adopting exposure limits; lobbying government bodies; giving a veneer of science to propaganda designed to minimize the scale of the risks; and occasionally throwing the odd sop the way of trade unionists.

The industry had hard figures on asbestos-related diseases much earlier than the public authorities. Between 1929 and 1935, industry-commissioned studies found that about half of asbestos miners and asbestos textile workers would suffer a serious illness. Understanding the gravity of this situation for its bottom line, the industry set about constructing two myths.

One is that there is no asbestosis in Canadian asbestos mines. Industry claims that observing basic industrial hygiene rules is enough to eliminate the risk. The other is that asbestosis is a substantially less dangerous disease than silicosis, so there is no need for binding legislation.

The link between asbestos and lung cancer was first shown in the early 1940s, when Dr Leroy Gardner had white mice breathe in asbestos fibres; 80% developed lung cancer. His findings were reported to asbestos giant Johns-Manville, which kept them tightly under wraps.

Industry-funded research was not just done on laboratory animals; it also used human guinea-pigs. Tens of thousands of workers exposed to asbestos were repeatedly studied over dozens of years. In addition to vital business funding, these “human resources” were used as a corporate asset by industry groups and made available to some researchers, or denied to other more critical and independent ones. This may offer some explanation for the fairly mutually beneficial relationship between top epidemiologists like Richard Doll and the asbestos industry.

The industry responded to the early studies on mesothelioma by creating a new myth: that chrysotile is a relatively harmless form of asbestos. An internal document of the North America section of the Asbestos International Association says in so many words that what must be done is to “start to tell the chrysotile story and discredit other fibres”.

The closing chapter leaves a bitter taste. One after another, the industry myths have been toppled. And yet world asbestos production has remained unchanged for the past fifteen-odd years. The industry has successfully changed direction. Apart from in the former Soviet republics, asbestos has almost completely gone out of use in the industrialized nations, but is increasing in Asia. Unlike before, the pro-asbestos crusade is now more State- than industry-led, spearheaded by Canada with vigorous support from Brazil, Russia and China.

— Laurent Vogel