

With new supporting evidence,
Quebec chrysotile is entitled to fair and balanced treatment

Montreal, September 9 – In releasing today the conclusive results of a study on the biopersistence of Quebec chrysotile, the Asbestos Institute has the necessary proof to reopen the debate on the safe and responsible use of chrysotile throughout the world. This unveiling of these results should mark a decisive step in reviving the future of this Quebec natural resource.

“The longer the biopersistence, the greater the health risk,” explains Denis Hamel, spokesperson for the Asbestos Institute. “The finding that chrysotile has a biopersistence of 16 days shows once again that safe and responsible use of Quebec chrysotile is possible, since its biopersistence is clearly lower than that of amphibole fibres and many replacement fibres. We would like, therefore, that the European Union accept this as proof that its decision to ban chrysotile is not scientifically well-founded and that it should have the courage to admit it.”

For the Institute, Quebec chrysotile is a victim not only of the heritage left over from improper use of amphibole asbestos fibres in the past, but also of pressure from the multinationals producing replacement fibres, even though an increasing number of scientists are raising concerns about the possible harmful health effects of these fibres. “With the results of this study”, says Denis Hamel, “the burden of proof now lies with the replacement fibres.”

Buoyed by the results of the biopersistence study on Quebec chrysotile, the Asbestos Institute will now focus on the following areas:

- Disseminating the results of the study to international bodies;
- Demanding in-depth studies on replacement fibres;
- Asking that regulations applying to asbestos be extended to all respirable fibres;
- Urging Quebec authorities to seriously examine the results of this study and, in light of which, consolidate implementation of the policy on chrysotile asbestos made public in the summer of 2002;
- Encouraging various players to increase their consumption of chrysotile by promoting certain uses, such as archival paper (e.g. for passports and civil registration documents), chrysotile asphalt, hydro poles, roof tiles, etc.

“The overall approach of the Asbestos Institute has always focused on prevention,” notes Denis Hamel. “Whether it is working with chrysotile asbestos, managing the errors of the past related to amphibole use, or handling replacement products, we believe we have to raise international awareness to the importance of safe and responsible use, since an outright ban resolves nothing.”

For Clément Godbout, President of the Institute, it is essential to continue responsible management of past problems (asbestos fireproofing, amphibole fibres) and to ensure

protection of the physical health of all workers. He would even like to see the implementation of new measures, such as the setting up of a certification system for asbestos removal contractors.

The Asbestos Institute also stresses the importance of this resource to Quebec. A resource whose future is threatened by false claims and which, if it were to disappear, would result not only in a huge loss of jobs, but also a marked weakening of the local economy of two Quebec regions, not to mention the loss of a unique, world-renowned expertise that is recognized in producer and user countries alike.

The Asbestos Institute is a private organization established in 1984 by chrysotile asbestos producing companies, unions and the governments of Canada and Quebec. Its role is to promote the adoption and implementation of regulations, standards, work methods and techniques for the safe and responsible use of chrysotile asbestos in Canada and throughout the world. The Asbestos Institute will shortly be changing its name to the Chrysotile Institute, in the goal of avoiding the existing widespread confusion between various types of asbestos fibres, certain forms of which are far more hazardous than chrysotile.

For further information: Denis Hamel, spokesperson – Tel.: (514) 877-9797
www.asbestos-institute.ca – www.chrysotile.com

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Conclusive results from a study by international scientists
Quebec chrysotile proven to be far less hazardous

Montreal, September 9 – To demonstrate, proof in hand, that chrysotile asbestos can be used safely and responsibly, the Asbestos Institute today released the results of a study by a team of leading international specialists on the biopersistence of the Canadian fibre. According to the study's preliminary results, chrysotile fibres are far less hazardous than amphibole fibres, whose widespread use following the Second World War has caused serious health problems in workers exposed to it.

To ensure this important study was conducted according to the highest scientific standards, the Institute mandated its coordination to Dr. Jacques Dunnigan, a Quebec toxicology expert, who has some 65 scientific papers to his credit, over 50 of which have been presented at international scientific meetings.

Funded by Quebec's Department of Natural Resources, Wildlife and Parks and the Asbestos Institute, this study on the biopersistence of Quebec chrysotile was conducted by Dr. David Bernstein, toxicologist (Geneva, Switzerland), Rick Rogers, Rogers Imaging Corporation (Needham, Massachusetts), and Paul Smith, Research & Consulting Company Ltd. (Füllinsdorf, Switzerland). The various phases of the study were conducted in three different laboratories—Research and Consulting Company Ltd. in Füllinsdorf (Switzerland), Gesellschaft für Schadstoffmessung und Auftragsanalytik (GSA) in Ness (Germany), and Rogers Imaging Corporation in Needham, Massachusetts (USA).

This is the first study on Quebec chrysotile to focus on biopersistence, a key parameter in determining the specific hazards associated with a fibre, and to compare different fibres with respect to this variable. Biopersistence is the measurement of the rate at which fibres are eliminated from the lungs. In 2001, it was confirmed as a crucial parameter by a task force of 19 experts from 11 countries reporting to the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC-WHO) and incorporated by the European Union into its evaluation protocol. According to the concept of biopersistence, if a fibre rapidly dissolves and disappears from the lungs, it does not have a carcinogenic effect.

Based on the preliminary results of this study, Quebec chrysotile fibres appear to be far less hazardous than amphibole fibres. The preliminary data show that Quebec chrysotile has a biopersistence of several days, compared with several years for amphibole fibres.

The study's main finding was that chrysotile fibres are eliminated very rapidly from the lungs: 92% of fibres of all dimensions disappeared within one month of exposure.

For the potentially carcinogenic longer fibres (> 20 µm), 50% were eliminated within two weeks, and less than 5% remained after three months.

These findings, although highly interesting in themselves, must be interpreted in light of a 2003 report issued by the Expert Panel on Health Effects of Asbestos and Synthetic Vitreous Fibres, which concluded that the overall data collected in epidemiological studies, analyses on laboratory animals and in vitro genotoxicity studies, combined with the lung's capacity to eliminate short fibres, tended to prove that it is unlikely that asbestos and vitreous synthetic fibers shorter than 5 µm were the cause of human cancers.

“We have known for many years, thanks to epidemiological studies, that chrysotile fibres are less hazardous to health than amphibole fibres”, explained Dr. Jacques Dunnigan, Ph.D. “This new study on biopersistence not only confirms these results, but also provides us with powerful support for this argument. The biopersistence shows that chrysotile compares favourably with replacement fibres, such as cellulose, whose biopersistence has been evaluated at 1,000 days. We have therefore assembled solid evidence enabling us to reopen the debate on the use of Quebec chrysotile.” The final results of this study should be made public in early 2004.

The Asbestos Institute is a not-for-profit organization established in 1984 by chrysotile asbestos producing companies, unions and the governments of Canada and Quebec. Its role is to promote the adoption and implementation of regulations, standards, work methods and techniques for the safe and responsible use of chrysotile asbestos in Canada and throughout the world.

Source: Dr. Jacques Dunnigan
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