
by

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on

“Precaution in science and the science-policy interface”

ABSTRACT

- Despite grave warnings over the past few decades regarding the health hazards of all types of asbestos, put forward by a variety of independent cancer, public health, and regulatory agencies, asbestos has continued to be sponsored by powerful money interests. Manufacturer uncertainty has permitted some countries and asbestos interest groups to justify promoting continued asbestos mining, use, and trade by referring to an alleged, ongoing epidemiological controversy.

- Respected entities, such as the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) and the Collegium Ramazzini, have spoken out strongly on the hazards of all forms of asbestos. But epidemiologists as a group had not.

- As a consequence, the Joint Policy Committee of the Societies of Epidemiology (JPC-SE) undertook the development of a Position Statement on Asbestos that puts forward our knowledge from a broad epidemiological perspective. The evidence clearly confirmed that all forms of asbestos are hazardous, leading to a Statement that is unequivocal.

- Through an inclusive process, across a broad range of epidemiological organizations, nationally and internationally positioned, endorsement was secured. The Statement was launched on July 24, 2012 (www.jpc-se.org). No longer can mired interests claim that there is meaningful controversy among epidemiologists as to the hazards of asbestos.

- The process was inclusive of all JPC-SE member society boards/councils, which necessitated addressing a broad range of critique, reflective of the diversity of the various board member constituencies. Being respectful of these critiques has resulted in a robust, definitive Statement of which all member societies can be proud.

THE JOINT POLICY COMMITTEE OF THE SOCIETIES OF EPIDEMIOLOGY (JPC-SE)

Our Current Member Organizations (n = 14)

- American Academy of Pediatrics, Section on Epidemiology (AAP SoEP)
- American College of Epidemiology (ACE)
- American Heart Association, Council on Epidemiology and Prevention (AHA)
- American Public Health Association, Epi Section (APHA-Epi Section)
- Brazilian Association of Public Health (Associação Brasileira de Saúde Coletiva) (ABRASCO)
- Canadian Society for Epidemiology and Biostatistics (CSEB)
- Council of State and Territorial Epidemiologists (CSTE)
- International Epidemiological Association (IEA)
- International Society for Environmental Epidemiology (ISEE)
- International Society for Pharmacoepidemiology (ISPE)
- National Association of County & City Health Officials (NACCHO)
- Society for Epidemiologic Research (SER)
- Society for Pediatric and Perinatal Epidemiologic Research (SPER)
- Society for the Analysis of African American Public Health Issues (SAAPHI)

THE STATEMENT’S DISSEMINATION

The JPC-SE launched its new website in June 2012, providing a platform for the Statement (www.jpc-se.org).

The Epidemiology Monitor (Epi Monitor) Covered the Process and the Statement:

- “Epidemiology Consortium Speaks Out on the Well-Established Dangers of Asbestos”
- “Epidemiology Societies Exhibit Extraordinary Degree of Cooperation in Preparing Position Statement on Asbestos”
- “Interviews with Epidemiologists about the Asbestos Statement and the Joint Committee Which Produced It”
- “Many Endorse New Asbestos Statement from Joint Policy Committee of the Societies of Epidemiology”
- “Asbestos Statement by Epidemiologists Seen As A Critical Contribution in an Ongoing Public Health Batttle,” a special article by Kathleen Ruff

Selected Others:

- The Canadian Environmental Law Association (CELA) announced the JPC-SE Statement on 7/24/12, and has called for a global asbestos ban as well as celebrated the changes announced in September 2012 by the Canadian federal government concerning its asbestos position.

Media Coverage has been extensive:

- Online reports were published (among others) in Canadian newspapers The Gazette, Le Devoir and La Presse. The Huffington Post also reported on the issue.
- Professor Colin L. Soskolne, PhD. was heavily quoted in an interview with Radio Canada International.
- Also of note is an interview that Dr. Soskolne gave to University Affairs.

THE STATEMENT’S INFLUENCE TO DATE

- Brazil Supreme Court hearing at the end of August, 2012.
- Canada’s federal government announced on September 14, 2012 that, at the next meeting in May 2013 of the Conference of the Parties to the Rotterdam Convention, Canada will no longer obstruct the listing of Chrysotile Asbestos as a hazardous substance in Annex III of the Convention. In addition, the Canadian government has committed $50 million in economic transition assistance to the single-industry town of Asbestos, Quebec, where Chrysotile Asbestos mining has been its sole significant industry for the past 130 years. (One cautionary note is that Canada’s government still claims “safe use” as possible: its reason for no longer obstructing the listing of Chrysotile Asbestos is that it would be illegal because the asbestos industry will no longer exist in Quebec – given that the newly elected Quebec government will not provide the loan needed to re-open mining operations.)
- On August 28, 2012, JPC-SE expert advisor, Kathleen Ruff, presented a paper entitled “Recommendations for action on asbestos – Canada and beyond” to the World Cancer Congress of the Union for International Cancer Control (UICC) in Montreal resulting in its release of its own Policy Statement.

THE STATEMENT ADDRESSES ...

- The science demonstrating cause and effect, and specifically the areas of science that defense attorneys rely on to argue their cases.
- AND ALSO: — It exposes the arguments that have been invoked and the historic role of mired interests in fomenting doubt.

WHAT THE STATEMENT ACCOMPLISHES

- It exposes those arguments invoked and forces deployed to foment doubt.
- It will not be easily dismissed by those government and industry groups that persist in trying to deny the science of cause and effect relating to all forms of asbestos exposure, regardless of the occupational or environmental setting.
- It unifies a variety of organizations for the first time.
- It provides a model for determining when meaningful controversy about data no longer exists.
- It draws from such data clear policy implications.
- It calls on organizations to support scientists being suppressed or oppressed in protecting the public interest – as per the ISEE (2000) “beleaguered colleagues” procedure (subsequently also adopted by the Collegium Ramazzini).

TRANSLATED FROM ENGLISH INTO ...

- French in full, since
  - There were political commitments to re-open an asbestos mine in Quebec (where the majority speaks French) with a government loan,
- Português in full, since
  - The asbestos industry has sued in the Supreme Court of Brazil that governments should not have the right to ban asbestos.
- Russian and Chinese (so far) – of only the Executive Summary and media release. And, Arabic is coming shortly ...

INITIAL AND NEW ENDEORSEMENTS

- Nine of the then 13 JPC-SE Member Organizations endorsed the Position Statement and four abstained (Appendix A).
- ORGANIZATIONS wishing to add their endorsement of the Position Statement on Asbestos can send an e-mail to JPCSE.endorsements@gmail.com, asking to be added to the list of endorsing organizations (in Appendix D).
- INDIVIDUALS wishing to endorse the Position Statement on Asbestos can send an e-mail to JPCSE.asbestos@gmail.com, asking to be added to the list of individual endorsers (in Appendix C).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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- Expert Advisor to the JPC-SE:
  - Kathleen Ruff
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