



# On the Harmful Legacy of Asbestos

By Dr. Rosana Salvaterra, Medical Officer of Public Health, Peterborough

Asbestos is one of the most important occupational carcinogens causing about half of all deaths from occupational cancer. Currently, about 125 million people in the world are exposed to asbestos in the workplace, and at least 90,000 people die each year from lung cancer, mesothelioma, and asbestosis resulting from occupational exposures. In addition, it is believed that globally, despite the bans on the use, sale and trade of asbestos, thousands of deaths can be attributed to other asbestos-related diseases as well as to non-occupational exposures. The global burden of asbestos-related disease is still rising.

Peterborough became aware of this “silent killer” over 15 years ago, when Aileen Hughes and her two sons encouraged Local 524 of the Canadian Auto Workers to screen retirees and current workers for asbestos-related problems. Her husband, Morris Hughes died at age 71 of mesothelioma. The local CAW president at the time, Keith Riel, committed to hold clinics at the Evinrude Centre.

Soon the magnitude of the exposure, and the human health risk, began to come to light. As reported in the Peterborough Examiner at the time, Jim Dufresne remembered plucking asbestos from collector bins at General Electric (GE) - it was called *plucking the goose*. Dennis O'Connor said he bought 100 bags of asbestos for a dollar each in the 1960s. Ernie Farris said his father spread asbestos from GE in the attic of the family home. GE was not the only employer where asbestos was at play – Peterborough was the home to many industrial and manufacturing workplaces with occupational exposures. And from these occupational sites, asbestos made its way into family homes and attics as well.

Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers were funded to screen and assess workers and their families. Peterborough Public Health assisted with the efforts, and followed up on calls from home owners with asbestos in their homes. Occupational Medicine specialist Dr. Noel Kerin led a team of four doctors and described the extent of exposures as “staggering”. Looking back over the past 20 years, there is evidence of this asbestos legacy in our community – rates for mesothelioma, a rare cancer

of the linings of the lungs which can only be caused by asbestos, are higher in Peterborough than the Ontario average. Men and women have died of this disease – about 70 in the last 20 years – and Dr. Kerin presented to Peterborough-area physicians at PRHC on May 10. He shared his findings over the years related to what are now considered “legacy” exposures in the factories and plants that are here no longer. There are retired workers who may have, or may still be at risk of developing, an occupational illness, who are entitled to compensation through the WSIB. There are families, like Aileen Hughes and her sons, who lost loved ones from exposures in the workplace.

Earlier in April, a delegation from the Italian city of Casale Monferatto visited Peterborough, Sarnia and Toronto – communities in Ontario with a legacy of occupational disease related to asbestos. Ten percent of Casale’s population has died from occupational and environmental exposure to asbestos, used in a cement factory that operated there until 1986. Chrysotile asbestos, mined in Canada, was also used in that plant. Today, forty years after the plant’s closure, there are still mesothelioma cases being diagnosed in young adults, at a rate of 50 new cases per year.

Despite the fact that asbestos was a known carcinogen and health hazard, Canada continued to export asbestos until December 30, 2018. Now that the government has taken definitive action, it is time to ensure that a comprehensive approach to reduce the harm and risk experienced by exposed and future populations be undertaken. The Peterborough board of health has passed a motion calling for a federal strategy to address asbestos related harms that it hopes will be supported by all of Ontario boards of health at their upcoming meeting in Kingston this June.

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