

# China and the US: asbestos in common

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More and more, the United States and Chinese economies share certain features, and not always those that are beneficial. Ranking now number one and number two in the world in terms of economic size, these two countries share the fact that they continue to use asbestos. While over 50 countries in the world have now totally banned any use of asbestos-containing materials, both the serpentine form and the amphiboles, both the United States and China continue to allow the use of asbestos products. There is no possible justification in this day and age for chrysotile being labeled the “good” or “safe” form of asbestos.

A paper by Wang *et al.*<sup>1</sup> in this issue does an excellent job in both laying out the use of asbestos in China, and reviews with great insight the problems that lie ahead for China with its continuing use of asbestos.

Not only is China now the second leading producer of asbestos, following only Russia, but it is now among the largest users in the world, along with India, where use is also growing. The Chinese use a bit over 600 000 tons per year, rivaling the United States’ use of some 775 000 tons annually in the early 1970s.

Increasingly, there are substitutes available to replace asbestos in various products, and many processes can obviate the need for the use of asbestos, especially for construction materials. In the West, the first bans on asbestos were some 30 years ago, and those countries that have banned it have not needed to use this dangerous material anywhere in their society. Asbestos disease has shown a decline in these countries following the discontinuation of use. It is unfortunate that as nations like China and its neighbor India become more industrialized, they have decided to make use of this material which is well known to cause a variety of diseases.

Wang *et al.*’s paper, which reviews the use of asbestos in China, reflects my own 20 years of experience in studying asbestos in that country and accurately portrays the role asbestos plays in that setting. With all that has been written about the hazards of asbestos it is, indeed, baffling to understand why its use continues

and expands. Part of the difficulty may lie in the fact that collection of disease data has been spotty at best, and it is relatively easy to deny that there is much of a problem when there are few statistics to elucidate the difficulties being suffered by workers in these countries.

Another source of wonderment is the striking use of tobacco in China. A major source of revenue for the government, it is easy to understand why there are not stronger efforts to reduce smoking, but in the long run the potential costs for medical care and the tens of millions of Chinese who will develop lung cancer from cigarette use will be a cost not easily offset by current revenues. Given the remarkable synergism between exposure to asbestos and tobacco, one can only surmise how many additional cases of lung cancer will be seen because of the widespread and continuing use of these two products. It is shameful that nations with better control of asbestos have not done much to encourage the Chinese to use less asbestos, and that companies based in these nations work diligently to sell tobacco products there.

Some might say that this behavior goes beyond being shameful, and could well be considered, in some settings, as criminal. In the recent Eternit trial in Turin, Italy, many years of prison sentences were handed down to company executives who for decades knowingly allowed workers to become ill and die from asbestos-related disease. There is no similar legal proceeding in China, nor is there any current useful system of compensation or other intervention that assists workers who have, or will become, ill from their handling of asbestos in the manufacture of a variety of products. There seems to be little concern for the workers of China, and the international effects from Chinese air pollution have to date brought about few efforts for meaningful change. While it is true that China is attempting to become a major player in the world of renewable energy, it is also clear that the building of numerous new coal fired power plants is not only potentially harmful to China, but may well have repercussions around the world. Ultimately, other countries in the world may not look so favorably upon this behavior by China, even though this has been a pattern of behavior of more fully industrialized countries in the past.

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Although pollution of the environment has never been a good thing, the level of understanding of the potential health and other consequences has never been greater, and one country's subjection of other nations to potentially hazardous outcomes may not be looked upon with much favor or understanding in the future.

Unless there is a concerted effort to determine the extent of asbestos-related disease in China, and in other industrializing countries such as India, we may never truly know the toll that asbestos will take in these settings. There is evidence that asbestos-related diseases are declining in the West as a result of past actions banning its use, but there is every reason to believe that with increasing use there will be increasing levels of disease, and such disease patterns will carry out into the future—even 40, 50, and 60 years from now. As we are frequently reminded, the absence of data does not mean the absence of disease.

In the US, the EPA's 1989 ban of asbestos was overturned by a federal court two years later. Currently, asbestos may not be used in flooring felt, rollboard, and corrugated, commercial, or speciality paper, but other uses of asbestos established prior to 1989 remain legal, although 'new' uses of asbestos are prohibited. Repeated efforts for a complete ban of

asbestos have met with defeat in Congress. While the potential influence of the United States may be lost on countries like China and India, there are other nations that would welcome the United States joining the many other nations that have banned asbestos entirely. As shameful as the lack of action here in the United States seems, it pales in comparison to the role that Canada has played in the selling and spread of the use of this deadly material. With the recent discussions of reopening asbestos mines, especially underground mines, we clearly see that a cabal of asbestos purveyors still exist in the world and all the protestations made, and all the phony research being paid for to discount the hazards of chrysotile, cannot take away the reality that this cancer causing substance will be responsible for many lives lost in the future, as it has been in the past. This will occur in China, India and if re-opened, the mines of Canada.

Disclosure: The author has consulted in asbestos-related and other litigation.

## References

- 1 Wang X, Courtice MN, Lin S. An updated review of asbestos-related disease in China. *Int J Occ Env Health*. 2012;18(3):247–253.