

Medical journal criticizes Canada asbestos exports

December 9 2010, By MARIA CHENG , AP Medical Writer

(AP) -- A medical journal is criticizing Canada for exporting asbestos to poor countries, joining others who have condemned the practice as hypocritical.

A report in the [journal Lancet](#) on Thursday notes that Canada virtually bans the use of asbestos. But, unlike other rich nations, it remains a major exporter of chrysotile, or white asbestos.

The Canadian Minister of Natural Resources office said its practice has a "sound scientific basis."

Asbestos is a natural mineral which can be processed for use in rooftops, piping, or building materials. Inhaling its fibers scars the lungs and can lead to [respiratory diseases](#), including cancers.

The [World Health Organization](#) says all types of asbestos cause cancer and more than 50 countries have banned it. About 100,000 people die every year from asbestos-related diseases and 125 million people remain exposed to the deadly substance worldwide.

Canada is the world's fourth biggest exporter of asbestos, after Russia, Kazakhstan and Brazil. Last year, Canada shipped 150,000 tons to countries including India, Indonesia and the Philippines, where few laws exist to protect people from asbestos.

In Canada, the government has spent millions of dollars removing

asbestos from buildings across the country, including its Parliament.

Numerous Canadian organizations, including the Quebec Medical Association, Canadian Cancer Society and the [Canadian Medical Association](#) have labeled Canada's asbestos exportation as deplorable, shameful and unethical. They describe it as Prime Minister "Stephen Harper's killer legacy."

"Canada should not be exporting asbestos to developing nations where there are few or no workplace regulations," Richard Horton, editor of the Lancet, said in a statement.

He called for an end to "this immoral export of asbestos-related death and disease to some of the most vulnerable people in the world."

The report was written by the Lancet's Tony Kirby.

With asbestos deposits dwindling in Quebec, where Canada's asbestos is mined, the industry appeared doomed. But an international consortium proposed converting a closed mine into a new operation that could produce about 260,000 ton of white asbestos a year. Quebec is considering providing a \$57 million loan guarantee for the project, according to previous published statements by the provincial government.

The international consortium that wants to reopen the mine claims Canadian asbestos is only sold to manufacturers with responsible use practices in place. Developers said all the mined asbestos would be sent abroad, with about half of it going to India. The consortium also said they would use pictures to instruct people on the safe and responsible usage of asbestos.

The office of the Canadian Minister of Natural Resources said they

believe the risks linked to asbestos can be managed.

"Canada's policy of controlled use has a sound scientific basis and is a responsible approach," said Paul Duchesne, a spokesman for the minister in an e-mailed statement.

"Through the enforcement of appropriate regulations to rigorously control exposure to (white asbestos), the health risks associated with processes and products can be reduced to acceptable levels," Duchesne said.

The Canadian government says the risks from white asbestos can be managed in controlled conditions, like if the substance is covered by another material so the asbestos layer is not releasing dust.

Kathleen Ruff, a senior human rights adviser to the Rideau Institute, an independent research and advocacy organization in Ottawa, said that exporting asbestos and refusing to alert poor countries to its dangers, Canada is intentionally doing harm.

In 2006, Canada led an effort to block a United Nations convention that would have made it mandatory to warn countries of hazardous substances like asbestos, she said.

"Canada has blood on its hands," Ruff said. "What we are doing is unconscionable. The whole world should condemn us."

Protesters plan to hit the street this week in Asia, London and Quebec, to demand a global ban on [asbestos](#) in any building materials.

More information: <http://www.lancet.com>

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Citation: Medical journal criticizes Canada asbestos exports (2010, December 9) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2010-12-medical-journal-criticizes-canada-asbestos.html>

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