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## Asbestos In Canada and Saskatchewan

Asbestos Use in Canada and Saskatchewan and The Formation of a Saskatchewan

Asbestos Registry: A Brief History

By James Daschuk and Kyle Arndt University of Regina

Asbestos was once one of the most widely-used construction-product ingredients in Saskatchewan, Canada, and indeed, the world. Because of its health implications, people have sought to have the mineral banned, and they have battled to make people aware of the presence of asbestos in buildings. Defining asbestos and outlining its uses, health detriments, efforts to ban the mineral and create an asbestos registry in Saskatchewan, and importance of the topic in this province, are all significant matters.

Asbestos, meaning “unquenchable or indestructible” in Greek, is the name for a group of six naturally occurring mineral silicates that have been mined all over the world, including Canada. Once called the “magic mineral” or “Canada’s gold” because of its exceptional properties of being water proof, fireproof, and corrosion-proof, it was universally desired by manufacturers. In the late 1800’s, large scale mining of asbestos began in Canada and incorporating the mineral into products became tremendously popular due its low cost and desirable qualities. It was used in hundreds of applications in buildings, homes, appliances, automobiles, and in a variety of every-day products from ironing-board pads, to children’s clothing and talcum powder.

Unlike man-made fibres such as fibreglass, asbestos can be split into thinner and thinner fibres which can only be seen by the most powerful microscopes; a human hair is approximately 300 times thicker than an asbestos fibre. The fibres are so light that if they are disturbed at all, or any air turbulence is present, they can float in the air for hours or even days.

Since asbestos is incombustible, strong, and flexible, it was incorporated into countless building materials. Some examples of common materials asbestos was used in are building exteriors (cement, stucco, brick), flooring (vinyl tiles and flooring, floor-leveling compounds), ceilings and walls (ceiling tiles, plaster or drywall), and all types of insulation. Products which are non-friable, such as ceiling tiles or cement, pose little risk of the asbestos becoming airborne unless the product is cut, broken or damaged, but products which are friable, such as spray products, release fibres into the air continuously. Asbestos-containing spray products were used openly until approximately 1972. One product that is usually friable and a major cause of concern in buildings is asbestos-containing sprayed-on acoustic or thermal insulation because it was used so commonly in components of high-rise office and public buildings, as well as in auditoriums, hallways and classrooms of school buildings, and for fireproofing structural steel.

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After many years of extreme use of asbestos products, health concerns started to arise. Not only are asbestos fibres extremely small, they are shaped like spears, needle sharp, and can break off with the slightest aggravation and be inhaled by the thousands. There is no safe level of exposure to asbestos, and once the fibres become lodged into the body's soft tissue in the lungs, abdomen, heart, brain, or any organ, they cannot be removed. Exposure to asbestos leads to cancer in the lungs, heart and abdomen and is the cause of mesothelioma, and asbestosis.

Mesothelioma is a deadly and rare form of cancer, often not diagnosed until it is in an advanced stage; it is found in the pleura of the lungs, the peritoneum of the abdomen or the pericardium of the heart. Mesothelioma is so lethal that it is said to be more painful and physiologically destructive than AIDS. The disease "has no effective treatment and is always fatal. One-half of all patients die during the first year following diagnosis and research shows that 98 per cent of people with mesothelioma die within three years. The only way to prevent mesothelioma is to decrease one's exposure to asbestos. Most people who get the disease have, at some point in their life, worked on jobs where they inhaled asbestos fibres.

Mesothelioma also leads to asbestosis, which is a fatal disease that kills its victims by essentially cutting off their oxygen supply. Scar tissue, caused by inhalation of asbestos fibres, becomes built up around the lungs which causes coughing, fluid build-up, difficulty breathing, and eventually causes the lungs to stiffen.

In 1949 asbestos miners in Quebec were already aware of the damage asbestos was doing to them and went on strike throughout the province, demanding a number of benefits such as an increase in pay, and the establishment of protective measures to protect workers from the deadly dust. The mining companies denied their demands, and the Quebec government deemed their protests illegal. In order to keep pace with production demands, the mining companies hired strike-breakers to work in the mines and did not rehire most of the strikers nor make any changes to the workers' health and safety.

An example of the commonplace nature of asbestos use and its implications occurred just last year, at 1870 Albert Street in Regina, when ninety government employees were told to evacuate their building for more than twenty-four hours because some asbestos was disturbed while maintenance was being done on a drain pipe ("Workers back after asbestos scare at Sask. workplace safety office," 2016). The University of Regina also has asbestos-containing materials in the Laboratory Building, Classroom Building, Dr. John Archer Library, Administration-Humanities Building, Campion College, Centre for Kinesiology Health and Sport, Heating Plant, Maintenance Building, Education Building, Technology Development Facility, and College West Building, potentially putting all students and staff at risk of asbestos exposure. Efforts to diminish the danger involved with asbestos took a major step forward in Canada and Saskatchewan in February of 2012. At this time, a Saskatchewan man named Howard Willems wanted to reduce the risk of people becoming exposed to asbestos present in public buildings and insisted the federal government establish a national registry of buildings that contain asbestos. Howard lived with mesothelioma after he came in contact with asbestos doing his job as a federal food plant inspector in Saskatchewan. He believed he contracted the disease from the older buildings he inspected while they were under renovation.

The major problem with these asbestos-related diseases is the fact that they are contracted so easily and unwittingly; a person simply has to be exposed to the toxic asbestos fibres. However, these diseases are also one-hundred-percent preventable if the correct actions are taken. Asbestos has been the leading cause of occupational deaths in Canada since 1996, and during this time period, it has been outnumbering fatalities from highway accidents, fires and chemical exposures combined.

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In 2016, asbestos-related diseases accounted for forty-two percent of workplace fatalities in Saskatchewan; of these thirty-one fatalities, thirteen were asbestosis (“Asbestos-related disease tops causes of workplace deaths in Sask. in 2016,” 2017).

Efforts to diminish the danger involved with asbestos took a major step forward in Canada and Saskatchewan in February of 2012. At this time, a Saskatchewan man named Howard Willems wanted to reduce the risk of people becoming exposed to asbestos present in public buildings and insisted the federal government establish a national registry of buildings that contain asbestos. Howard lived with mesothelioma after he came in contact with asbestos doing his job as a federal food plant inspector in Saskatchewan. He believed he contracted the disease from the older buildings he inspected while they were under renovation. Mr. Willems created the Saskatchewan Asbestos Disease Awareness Organization, with the goal of requiring that all buildings containing asbestos disclose this information to the people entering. Howard had no idea what asbestos was capable of and had no idea the buildings he was in contained it, and he did not believe that was acceptable; he did not want people to endure the same suffering as he did from a disease that is preventable.

Just a few months later, on November 8, 2012, Howard lost his battle with mesothelioma and passed away at the age of 59. On April 18, 2013, the Saskatchewan provincial government passed the law to create an asbestos registry and titled it *The Public Health (Howard’s Law) Amendment Act* (Bill 604) in honor of Mr. Willems. The law was added to *The Public Health Act, 1994*, and made it mandatory for all public buildings such as schools, health regions, government buildings and Crown corporations to ensure their buildings are listed on the online registry if their buildings contain any asbestos.

*Howard’s Law* was notably significant to Saskatchewan because the asbestos registry was the first one ever made in Canada and because it helped create awareness about asbestos for the rest of the country as well. The online registry is a major advancement for the health and safety of the workers and citizens of Saskatchewan because it could potentially save people from contracting an asbestos-related disease. The registry allows anyone to freely search on the internet for any buildings in the province that have asbestos and to note the type of asbestos in those buildings (Giles, 2015). However, the registry is not enough to end the problem; it is only the beginning, as asbestos products continue to be imported into and used in this country despite the health warnings.

The fight for a total ban of asbestos in Canada gained momentum in November of 2016; Sheri Benson, an NDP Member of Parliament for Saskatoon West, introduced a bill to prohibit asbestos manufacturing and to the end the use, sale, or importing of asbestos-containing substances. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said that the Canadian Government has been considering the issue and stated “We are moving to ban asbestos. We know that its impact on workers far outweighs any benefit that it might provide”.

In spite of all the challenges, at long last, in 2018, Canada will place a full ban on asbestos and will establish many more laws regarding the toxin. This means that products such as construction materials and brake-pads which contain asbestos will no longer be imported into the country. As well, new building regulations will be introduced to ban the use of the asbestos-containing products for construction, and new workplace health and safety rules will drastically limit the number of people coming into contact with the substance.

Asbestos is an important issue in regards to the health of people in Saskatchewan because it accounts for forty-two percent of work place fatalities in the province. No person should die or suffer in pain from a workplace hazard, especially one that can be so easily prevented by simply wearing a mask or having knowledge of the threat. It was Willems who initially raised awareness in Saskatchewan, and indeed Canada, when he proposed a registry be created that would inform people regarding buildings containing asbestos-related materials. Due largely to Willem’s efforts, Saskatchewan became the first and only province to form an asbestos registry, providing safety and awareness for people who might be going into or working on those buildings. Mesothelioma and asbestosis are two diseases that are completely preventable if the right precautions are taken.

Although it was once widely used around the world, it has become clear that because of the health detriments associated with it, asbestos must be banned. Thanks to individuals like Saskatchewan’s own Howard Willems, this ban will eventually become a reality.

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## SFL Report: Submitted by Nathan Kraemer, Negotiating Chairperson

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On October 18<sup>th</sup> through the 20<sup>th</sup> the Saskatchewan Federation of Labour held their 62<sup>nd</sup> annual convention in Saskatoon. We were able to send seven of our local executive members to this event which provides valuable opportunities to network with members of other unions and locals from around Saskatchewan in order to develop relationships learn what is happening in the Labour movement outside of our own local, city, or employment sector. The agenda topics covered were discussions and presentations on Organized Labour and the Charter of Rights, Mental Health and Addiction, Cannabis in the Workplace, and Good Union Jobs in a Green Economy, among others. We also discussed the Sask Party Government's desire to wind down or sell our crown corporations why that is a bad thing for everyone in Saskatchewan, and learned about the ongoing Our Crowns Plebiscite Campaign being spearheaded by the SaskCrowns 2017 Co-coordinating Committee. This is the same petition that you have probably seen around your shops and control rooms for which 116,000 signatures are required in order to force any government wishing to sell or wind down any part of a crown to hold a referendum allowing Sask voters, the true shareholders of those corporations, to have a say. We participated in a march to the Saskatoon Cabinet Office where we joined in the "We're Not Gonna Take It" rally against cuts made in the latest provincial budget. Every year our local's affiliation with the SFL, and participation in the annual convention provides us with invaluable information and connections and this year was no exception. We look forward to the next convention which will be held in October 2018 in Regina where we will again send members of our local to engage and stay active in the Labour movement on a provincial level.

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### Last Laugh

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