Ray Morris

Occupational Cancer in a Small Ontario Community and Corporate Illegality

Corporate criminal behavior is pervasive in our society, but seldom reported or discussed. I believe that a critical examination of the impact of work on health will provide a particularly damning indictment of corporate negligence and wrongdoing that has had historically dire human consequences.

For the last two years I’ve been representing the Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers in establishing a clinic in Sarnia, Ontario. This activity was triggered by the discovery of a huge cluster of occupational disease.

The Sarnia clinic has been flooded with patients many suffering from cancer, respiratory diseases, and neurological disease. The incidence of these diseases, long known to be elevated, were tolerated in that community for many, many years. Sarnia has the highest rates of mesothelioma [a pleural cancer from asbestos inhalation] in Canada.

One woman, whose father died of asbestos related lung cancer, told me that Sarnia accepted that “its men die young”.

This observation reveals the sad reality of capitalist society, where the working men and women must chose between the need to make a living and the prospect that their work may injure their health.

I am going to share with you information gleaned through the Freedom of Information Act regarding the activity of the Ontario Ministry of Labour at the Holmes Foundry complex in Sarnia, Ontario. This material will demonstrate how government inspectors and hygienists ignored workers? Exposures who were kept in ignorance by their profit-chasing employers. As a result hundreds of workers and even members of their families who never actually worked within the complex, were stricken with cancer, respiratory disease and other ailments. These totally preventable illnesses caused thousands of loss years of life.

Sarnia is a small community of just over 70,000 people. It is the home of the petrochemical industry. Our clinic started to see workers in 1993. Within a short time we were approached by a former Owens Corning worker and his wife. Bud Simpson came to our office with a list of over 25 names of his fellow workers who had died of cancer. The plant had closed in 1991, but many of the workers continued to stay in touch with each other. Through this network we were to learn that the company had sponsored a health study in the late 1980s involving McMaster University researchers. It had reported a finding of twice the expected lung cancer among the fibreglass workers.

Elevated lung cancer is found consistently among fibreglass production workers from around the world.
About the same time, in 1993, Bob Clarke, the Canadian Automobile Worker's chair of the Holmes Foundry, contacted the clinic. He told us that over 50 workers had already received compensation for occupational diseases at the foundry. Bob believed that these claims were just the tip of the iceberg. This belief, if true, represented an incredible public health disaster. The Holmes Foundry had closed in the late 1980's.

In 1998, the CEP, the union which had represented the former Owen's Corning workers, and the CAW, which had represented the former Holmes workers, sponsored compensation clinics. Over 500 workers and their families, many with occupational illnesses, attended. These two dramatic events triggered national publicity about the state of occupational health in Ontario.

We asked the two unions to use the Freedom of Information Act to acquire government inspection reports of the workplace. What was revealed was positively scandalous. The following is a summary.

In 1958 the owners of the Holmes facilities in Sarnia and the Ministry of Health, which was responsible for health and safety at that time, exchanged letters, which acknowledged the potential health hazard of asbestos exposure.

When the Ministry conducted air samples later that year they found levels that were 28 times above their own standard! This would translate into exposures that were as high as 6,720 times our current legal limit for asbestos! The government issued no Directions or Orders. They would not return to this plant for another nine years.

When the government inspectors finally returned in 1967, they estimated the total production at the Holmes Caposite plant to be 10,000 pounds per day of asbestos insulation. The government inspectors took 34 air samples, of which only 5 were below the legal limit then in place. The average sample was 2.7 times the standard of the day. That's over a thousand times our current standards! This time the Ministry issued 9 Directions to the Company with regards to ventilation and asbestos handling. These Directions were not followed up or enforced.

In spite of the government's awareness about the potential adverse health effects, government inspectors repeatedly failed to enforce the asbestos regulations. They witnessed and recorded illegal and astronomical asbestos measurements that were thousands of times higher than our current exposure limits, and hundreds of times higher than was permissible at the time. Yet, it was not until 1972 that the ministry was to return to sample for asbestos. In one instance, in 1973, the government recorded asbestos levels that would be over 8,500 times our current legal limit! Government inspectors acknowledge that, very likely, these were the highest levels of asbestos ever recorded.

In 1987, a Ministry of Labour epidemiologist, Dr. Murray Finkelstein, prepared a study titled "Mortality Among Employees of a Sarnia Ontario Factory Which Manufactured Insulation Materials From Amosite Asbestos." His findings were staggering. He found a six-fold increase in lung cancer mortality among the Holmes workers exposed to asbestos...
for two years or more. He also documented an eleven-fold increase in respiratory disease mortality and a four-fold excess of all malignancies.

Dr. Finkelstein also cited 5 cases of mesothelioma among former Holmes workers. Three of the 5 workers died at less than 50 years of age and all were less than 60 years old!

Today our clinic in Sarnia has over 1700 former Owens Corning, Holmes, Building Trades and other workers from the Chemical Valley registered to see our doctors. We have already interviewed the wife of a former Holmes worker who is herself suffering from asbestosis because of the asbestos her husband brought home on his clothes. We have interviewed a worker who delivered milk to the Holmes plant, who now has asbestosis. We have had contact with the mother of a sixteen-year-old boy who died of mesothelioma. His father worked at Holmes.

This case study is unfortunately only one of many examples of employer and government disregard for the health of workers. Today society as a whole is paying the price for such negligence.

It is well-known that we are experiencing a "cancer epidemic" that is affecting almost every Canadian family. Statistics Canada projects this year over 130,000 Canadians will contract cancer and close to half will die from it. In the 1970's, 1 in 10 people contracted cancer. By the 1980's, it was 1 in 5. Today, more than 1 in 3 Canadians face the frightening prospect of cancer.

It is important to remember that this is a largely preventable disease. The World Health Organization estimates that 70 to 90 percent of all cancer is environmentally related. In other words, it is not bad genes that present the greatest risk, but toxic substances in our food, water, air and environment, including the workplace.

Scientific evidence demonstrates that blue-collar workers are bearing a disproportionate share of the cancer burden. The World Health Organization estimates that there are globally 1-million work-related deaths per year. Cancer is the single largest cause of premature mortality among workers. The WHO attributes over 34% of the deaths to carcinogenic exposures at work. Not accidents, not injuries, not respiratory disease, but cancer is the leading cause of occupationally related death.

Workers in certain carcinogen-laden industries are contracting cancer at rates well beyond those experienced by the general population. At least 60 different occupations have been identified as posing an increased cancer risk. Studies show that the auto industry is producing laryngeal, stomach and colorectal cancers, along with its cars. The steel industry is producing lung cancer, along with its metal products. Miners experience respiratory cancers many times higher than expected. Electrical workers are suffering increased rates of brain cancer and leukemia. Dry cleaners have elevated rates of digestive tract cancers. Firefighters contract brain and blood-related cancers at many times the expected levels. Women in the plastics and rubber industry are at greater risk for uterine cancer and possibly breast cancer. The list goes on and on.
How do we know whether or not something causes cancer? We have identified almost every known carcinogen from the death certificates of workers. They have served as society's guinea pigs, as the early warning, one which has been systematically ignored. The International Agency for the Research of Cancer (IARC) has identified 24 substances that cause lung cancer in humans. Twenty-three [1] were determined by the excess mortality of workers who were over-exposed to these substances. [2]

If blue collar workers, both male and female, are at increased risk and are bearing a greater cancer burden compared to the rest of society, then we also must say they are not alone. Women from all classes are experiencing their own cancer epidemic. Breast cancer has doubled within a generation, now affecting one in eight women. It was reported in the Toronto Star that new scientific estimates predict that it may double once again.

Children are another group whose rates have been steadily increasing, particularly with regards to leukemia and brain cancer. No one can employ the rationale that "poor lifestyles" are responsible for these diseases among our young, an explanation often offered to explain the incidence of the diseases in adults. This fashionable explanation, thereby, loses much of its credibility. Here it is important to note that some 20 US and international studies have incriminated parental exposure to occupational carcinogens as major cause of childhood cancer, whose incidence has increased 21% since 1950. And, the workplace is a major source of such exposure and contamination.

Working men and women have had a long historical experience with cancer-causing agents at work. Drs Rammazini and Potts documented cancers among miners and chimney sweeps hundreds of years ago. In more recent times we found that the miners of northern Ontario were suffering from cancers, particularly of the lung, at many times the expected rate. Their struggles to end these exposures led to a Royal Commission, which created the foundation for Ontario's contemporary health and safety laws. A few years later, the revelations about asbestos-related disease at the Johns Manville plant in Scarborough and at the Bendix plant in Windsor triggered another Royal Commission.

Why are reactions so slow? Why do so many people have to suffer before even the most timid measures to prevent and compensate harms are put into place? The answer lies in our reverence for the for-profit sphere.

There is an infamous "serial killer of workers" -- asbestos-- that provides some clear insight into the workings of the corporate mind and of the governments it controls. It's like the book, "All You Really Need to Know, I Learned in Kindergarten." Well, all you need to really need to know about the root causes, the cover-ups, and the human impact of occupational cancer, you can learn from the example of asbestos.

It tells you everything you need know about the reality of our economic system, what it values and what it fails to protect;
It teaches about the collusion between government and industry;

It addresses the issue of so-called "junk science" and how the powers-that-be control information and public health policy;

It reveals the hidden injuries of class, where working people must face the grim choice between their livelihood and their health;

And it drives home the old axiom of working class history -- that everything you get in this society you must fight for.

Asbestos, the Magic Mineral, is the best known and most widely studied workplace carcinogen because of its widespread use and its lethal quality to induce cancer and respiratory disease at relatively low levels of exposure.

Although the dangers of asbestos were discussed in the medical literature from as early as the 1930s, in North America it was Dr. Irving Selikoff and his colleagues in the 1960s who methodically documented the excess disease caused by asbestos and brought it to the public's attention. Their findings revealed very high rates of cancer, including cancers of the lung, larynx, and gastrointestinal tract. Asbestos was also shown to cause a fibrotic lung disease, called asbestosis, as well as mesothelioma, a deadly cancer usually found on the lining of the lung.

While these studies furnished scientific evidence of asbestos' virulent character, it had long been suspected as a killer. As early as 1918 Canadian and American insurance companies were refusing to insure asbestos miners due to their high rates of lung disease. In the 1930s Johns Manville already knew that over 50% of its Quebec textile workers, the majority of whom were women, were suffering from asbestos related respiratory disease. In 1948, the 708 miners at the Jeffery asbestos mine in Quebec were given x-rays. Only four of the miners were found to be without asbestos markings on their lungs. The company never told the diseased miners of their findings.

This flagrant misconduct by the asbestos industry continued right into the 1960s when American government hearings revealed a massive industry-wide conspiracy, often with governmental collusion, that, over the last twenty years, has triggered the deaths of over 200,000 American workers.

Today this story continues in Canada and the public is still being kept in the dark. While the federal government is spending over a billion dollars to remove asbestos from Parliament house and other government buildings in Ottawa, it is also using the World Trade Organization to stop the European ban on asbestos.

The British Journal on Cancer recently published a study that estimated that over 250,000 people in Europe will die from mesothelioma in the next 35 years. The figure represents almost a million preventable deaths in Europe. This has led to action. The European Union is banning chrysolite asbestos. The Canadian government, in an effort to
stop the ban, has launched a complaint to the World Trade Organization. It is seeking to protect its asbestos mining industry in Quebec.

What this means is that the horror of Holmes and scores of other asbestos-contaminated workplaces is being exacerbated to-day by the active support of the Canadian government. Canada is using its money and power in order to continue to sell asbestos, particularly to the developing countries, where it is now estimated that over 1 million workers will die from asbestos-related diseases. If Britain, Sweden, Germany and Italy have found it difficult to control asbestos exposure and related diseases with all their regulations, how can workers in Egypt, India and Brazil defend themselves?

Unfortunately, the asbestos industry is not the only rogue corporation. Nor is the asbestos story simply a historical artifact.

Let me give you one final example. In 1992, our clinic opened in Windsor, Ontario. On the very first day, one of our physicians, Dr. Abe Reinhartz, and I had a meeting with the CAW leaders at Local 444. Local 444 represents the Chrysler workers and is the largest employer in the community. We gave union representatives copies of studies that we have found in scientific journals about the possible cancer risk among auto workers who were exposed to metalworking fluids. We also gave them a report that documented over 120 health and hygiene studies on American autoworkers funded by the “Big 3” (General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler). About 55 of these studies had focussed on metalworking fluids.

This was the first time the CAW officials had ever been shown this information. The law in Ontario requires employers to disclose any health studies that would be relevant to their employees. In spite of this legal requirement, the auto producers had hidden this information from Canadian workers performing the same operations as their American counterparts.

And what did these studies reveal? The most elaborate cohort study, and the one that had the most impact, was a research project conducted by Harvard University on 46,000 G.M. workers in Michigan. This study found a wide range of excess cancers among workers who had been exposed to metalworking fluids, including cancer of the rectum, esophagus, larynx, and prostate. Thousands of people in Windsor are employed in industries where metalworking fluids are present.

There were other health studies which examined the potential health effects of metalworking fluids on US auto workers which we passed on to the CAW. For example, there were nine cohort studies done in the auto industry. Seven studies found an elevation of cancer of the pancreas -- in the G.M./Harvard study, there was 62% excess. Seven studies found excess stomach cancer -- four of them found a doubling of the excess, with an SMR of over two. Six studies found excess of esophageal cancer -- the Harvard researchers employed a nested case control of the GM workers and found an excess nine times the expected rate among these exposed workers. Six studies found an excess of rectal cancer -- in the G.M. study it was 2-1/2 times the expected rate.
Perhaps the most shocking aspect of all of this research is the fact that the population at risk, the auto workers employed in these industries, had never been told about the studies and their respective results.

From 1992 until 1998 I was a member of the Ontario Occupational Disease Panel. This was a body that recommended to the Workers Compensation Board which diseases should be compensated. While I was on the panel we began to examine the possible association between metalworking fluids and cancer. The Ontario Ministry of Labour provided our panel with government-conducted air monitoring results for the period of 1990 to 1996. In the auto and aircraft industry 14% of the personal samples were in excess of the legal limits of 5 mg per cubic metre. Almost 29% were in excess of 1 mg per cubic metre. It should be noted that NIOSH in the U.S. has recommended that the standard should be .4 mg per cc. It says that, at the .4 mg standard, there will still be excess cancers and respiratory disease among these workers. We tolerate levels in Ontario well in excess of not only the legal level but also in excess of any health-based standard.

So what has been the governmental response to these findings? Unfortunately I have to report that, in Ontario, the permissible exposure remains at 5 mg per cubic meter. The CAW, however, in their collective agreements with the Big 3 have lowered the standard to 1 mg in all of those facilities. That is not a safe level but it is five times below the current legal level. The CAW has also has won an agreement from the Big 3 to the effect that they will share the results of any future studies with the union. This is a step forward for a stratum of workers who have used their collective strength to win some protection. Unfortunately, most workers do not have even this level of partial safety.

Occupational disease and injury are simply part of the on-going reality of work in Canadian society and the socially accepted outcomes of economic activity. Society as a whole continues to fail to provide the most basic of human rights - the right to work in an environment that is free from harm and free from fear.

Jim Brophy.

[1] Tobacco smoke being the 24th

[2] 77% of the substances that cause other types of cancer were similarly identified

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