LETTER TO THE EDITOR

'MAGIC, MENACE, MYTH AND MALICE'

If one were looking for a balanced account, the 'horror, shock, probe' tone of the title of Professor Liddell's editorial strikes a note of ill omen that is echoed in the repeated outbursts in the text. By no stretch of the imagination can it be claimed that it represents an even handed, well researched, accurate account of the history involved. In his review, Liddell distorts the chrysotile controversy by omitting to acknowledge in full the part played by industry in a long and sorry operation that delayed the amelioration of conditions for exposed workers. To be fair, he does instance one episode when the German Asbestos industry misused McGill data, which he categorised as mischievous. (To the simple soul, heedless of the laws of defamation, some word more severe than mischief would suggest itself in this instance.) If Liddell had studied the archives now freely available, he would have been able to acquaint the reader with the extent of even naughtier behaviour by industry.

The late Irving Selikoff and his putative Lobby are caricatured as the Black Knights, unworthily motivated and funded by some unidentified opposed vested interest, while Corbett McDonald and Hans Weill are identified as the much maligned White Knights. While Liddell complains of vicious ad hominem attacks from The Lobby against the forces of light, he himself is not averse to the odd 'Yah boo! to Selikoff' in his editorial.

To declare my interest, I was privileged to spend time both with Hans Weill in New Orleans, and with Irving Selikoff in New York and learnt to appreciate them. While visiting them in 1974, I called in at McGill and discussed with Margaret Becklake the disservice to Public Health interest of this polarisation of scientists. We agreed that it was desirable that McDonald and Selikoff should meet and review their data. We believed that much would be learnt from an attempt to reconcile the apparent scientific disparities. A meeting was arranged between Mt Sinai and McGill on neutral territory in Albany, but regrettably it never took place.

In statements on the awareness of asbestos hazards, Liddell presents a confusing view even of the published data. In this first paragraph he seems to give the 1950s and 1960s as the time of awareness. Elsewhere there are nods to, 1898 (Lucy Deane), 1906 (Montague Murray, but not Auribault), 1930 (Merewether). In the report of the 1907 Departmental Committee report in which the Montague Murray case was first presented, contrary to what Liddell maintains, the official view was not that asbestos could not cause lung disease. When questioned by Legge, Murray replied: '... considerable trouble is now taken to prevent the inhalation of dust, so that the disease is not so likely to occur as heretofore.' Which is not quite the same thing.

Fibroid phthisis in asbestos workers was not scheduled as a compensatable disease because it was believed that there was not much around. This asseveration was made in the absence either of an industry survey, or a study of surviving workers at the
factory concerned, an omission that Legge was to express regret for shortly before he died some 30 years later.

Liddell implies that the first recommendations for environmental control originated in 1930. In this he does the earlier HM Inspectors of Factories less than justice. HM Chief Inspector's Annual Reports refer to the control of asbestos dust from 1898 onwards.

The defence of chrysotile has a long history. As far back as 1912, HM Chief Inspector was assured by the Canadian Department of Labour that there were no health problems in Canadian asbestos miners and millers, and in particular that all the women employed in a large asbestos mine and mill looked strong and healthy. (Those were the good old days before there was a malicious, wrathful, insidious, unprincipled and antisocial Lobby, epithets taken from Liddell's editorial, to question a chap's opinion.) Nevertheless, the Inspectorate persevered in recommending dust control. Further, Auribault's report of 1906 dealing with the devastating effects of Canadian chrysotile on textile workers, included a substantial section on dust control. As for his contention that the earliest studies in the US took place in the mid-1930s, he overlooks Pancoast's 1918 early warning of the effects of asbestos on the lungs, and that same year Hoffman expressed alarm at the self-evident injuriousness of asbestos dust, and regretted that there were no medical observations on record as to the possible injurious effects in mining and manufacturing in the US. As Liddell notes, a mere 50 years later such a study was initiated in Quebec's mines.

I have only dealt with the historical element in Liddell’s review. In his peroration, Liddell, concludes '... it is essential that the views of the great majority of scientists working in these fields [that current levels of occupational exposures to chrysotile are essentially innocuous, except possibly in textiles] come to prevail.' Space considerations alone would not permit me to deal with the scientific arguments he produces. I would however cite the consensus received wisdom on the human health hazards of the various species of asbestos as enshrined in WHO publications, in the IARC Monograph series and in the IPCS Environmental Health Criteria Guidelines. They are less sanguine about chrysotile than Liddell is, and I would contend are more authoritative.

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REFERENCE