In U.S.A.  
In America, the chrysotile industry has succeeded in explaining that it has a right to exist by demonstrating before the courts that it does not expose its workers or the general public to significant risks. In 1991, the U.S. Court of Appeals accepted the soundness of its argument by reversing the ban imposed by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Furthermore, following a conference that it organized in Oakland (California) in May 2001, the EPA is in the process of revising its entire risk analysis model, which presently does not differentiate between the various types of asbestos. Irrefutable proof as to the lower toxicity of chrysotile compared to amphiboles is becoming more and more difficult for the EPA to ignore.

However, it is the American judicial system that has beaten a large portion of the chrysotile industry and a good number of the companies that have used this fibre, in some way or another, in their production process. The American courts are also grappling with 500,000 indemnity cases representing the astronomical sum of US$275 billion.

Over the past twelve months, nine companies have been forced into bankruptcy because of legal action linked to asbestos, and numerous others are faced with the same fate. Many of these companies have never manufactured asbestos containing products, they have simply, over the course of time, been shareholders of companies involved in the transformation of asbestos.

What is most shocking in this judicial saga is that over half of the amounts awarded by the courts are paid to lawyers while the rest goes mainly to people who can show that they have been exposed to asbestos during their work, without it necessarily having any adverse effects on their health. The long delays due to the number of cases before the courts, workers who have, in the past, suffered health problems because of prolonged exposure to large quantities of asbestos often do not receive the compensation to which they are entitled. This is why the weekly magazine Fortune recently ran the headline “Asbestos lawyers are pitting plaintiffs who aren’t sick against companies that have never made the stuff—and extracting billions for themselves.”

And now …

Unlimited recourse to litigation, the study begun by the EPA concerning various asbestos fibres and the ineffectiveness of insulation that replaced asbestos in the World Trade Centre structure are all new elements that should bring about a more objective study of chrysotile. In the U.S.A., as in Great Britain and in France, it is regrettable that it should take so long for the truth to extricate itself from all the commercial and economic considerations that have clouded the issue. We can only rejoice in the fact that some sixty countries that continue to safely use chrysotile, have resisted the often vicious and false attacks from the anti-asbestos movement, and now see their determination rewarded as the truth begins to emerge.

New Publication from the Asbestos Institute  
A new 16-page booklet entitled “Saving lives with chrysotile asbestos” is now available. This publication will provide information about the properties of asbestos, the various types of asbestos, historical milestones in the evolution of this material, the various stakeholders, the uses of asbestos, and the key safety practices governing its use. It is also intended to draw attention to the stakes involved in the fierce commercial war that pits chrysotile asbestos against industrial interests offering replacement products, generally referred to as substitutes. To obtain this publication, either call the Asbestos Institute, or download the document from our web site: www.chrysotile.com.
Countries in the European Economic Community no longer work chrysotile mines and the demand for this fibre has gradually decreased, given the reduced demand for basic infrastructure and agricultural buildings. It should be remembered that, following the Second World War, Europe used almost 25 million tons of asbestos during rebuilding and modernizing. Numerous companies, mainly in France, Great Britain and Belgium, were important importers of all types of asbestos fibres, often without paying any attention to the health and safety of workers engaged in making the products and in the pulverization of insulating mixtures. In view of the protests about industrial illnesses caused by the absence of control measures, these companies have chosen to use alternative materials. But the marketing of these products has not been without problem because their higher price and lower durability have made them uncompetitive with asbestos products. Unless there is a total ban on asbestos products, these companies will see their market share reduced considerably. Great efforts, supported by generous financial contributions, have been made to destroy the reputation of chrysotile by linking present use to victims of past products and uses. Worse still, bolstered by their supporters, have been made to destroy the reputation of chrysotile by linking present use to victims of past products and uses. Worse still, bolstered by their supporters, have been made to destroy the reputation of chrysotile by linking present use to victims of past products and uses.

In Great Britain

In the '90s, politicians and union leaders joined the battle waged by the multinationals; they were represented by the Asbestos Information Council and supported by the Association of Manufacturers Against Asbestos, as well as by the Asbestos Removers Contractors Association, which all held great sway with the local industry, does not take up these questions. Also, the Association interentreprises de médecine du travail (AIMT) produced a file on asbestos in January 2002 that summarizes the current legal position in France. It draws its readers' attention to the conclusions of a report issued by the Institut national de santé et de recherche médicale (INSERM) concerning the fibres that are replacing asbestos, saying "All new fibres proposed as substitutes for asbestos, or for any other use, must initially be suspected of being pathogenic because of their structure."

A thesis for a Master's degree at the Université Paris VII, quoted by the AIMT, criticised the handling of the asbestos file as being more political than scientific. In their report, the group of experts from INSERM emphasised that they had attempted "to present a scientific opinion of the facts upon which a public debate and a decision by a competent body could be based." This debate, requested by the experts, never took place. The day after the report was presented, the ministre du travail et des affaires sociales announced a series of measures concerning, amongst other things, a ban on asbestos as of January 1, 1997. The Director of INSERM's service d'expertise collective still regrets that the subject was never discussed: "It is as though French people were not ready to hear both sides of the question. My impression is that the press caught the public's attention with a scoop but never really examined the topic."

Perhaps the time has now come to debate the chrysotile question. The Internet Web site, Info-amianté, which provides information in French concerning asbestos, puts the question properly by stating it as "a danger that the entire scientific world judges to be relatively slight as far as asbestos made from serpentine fibres (chrysotile) that have been transformed, manipulated and controlled in such a manner that the dust count is negligible (mainly concerning chrysotile cement, now banned in France). The controversy concerns the threshold level, where certain legislations have set levels for artificial pollution that are lower than the naturally occurring levels." It is difficult to have a clear view of this scientific debate because the media, motivated by sales figures rather than a desire to truly inform its readers, tends to present a skewed view of the topic.

3 Masters thesis written by Sonya Bertrand under the guidance of Jean-Michel Forestier, Editor of the newspaper “l’Assistance médicale” and Paul Janiaud, Director of Unit SC 15 of INSERM. Presented on September 29, ’97 at the "Institut de Communication, Cinéma et Information, Université Denis Diderot (Paris VII)"
4 http://www.azimutconcept.com/amiant/index.htm

In France

Following the outcry caused by the presence of asbestos at the Université de Jussieu and the subsequent media coverage, France adopted a series of measures aimed at eliminating all forms of asbestos in the country... as if the elimination of a naturally occurring substance was possible! The last in the series is a law prohibiting the sale of vehicles containing asbestos, when the majority of cars built before 1996 are fitted with brakes or clutches that use chrysotile based components. This new law, which places a further burden on motorists, and an unnecessary one at that, could provoke a debate on the French government's exaggerated response to this matter. It is to be hoped that the presidential election campaign will provide a forum for this debate.

More and more questions are being asked as to why France acted so rapidly and in such a cavalier manner to ban chrysotile in 1996. Unfortunately, the French press, which is rather inclined to dramatise facts and to support local industry, does not take up these questions. Also, the Association interentreprises de médecine du travail (AIMT) produced a file on asbestos in January 2002 that summarizes the current legal position in France. It draws its readers' attention to the conclusions of a report issued by the Institut national de santé et de recherche médicale (INSERM) concerning the fibres that are replacing asbestos, saying "All new fibres proposed as substitutes for asbestos, or for any other use, must initially be suspected of being pathogenic because of their structure."

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