

Dr. Alan Shepard  
President & Vice-Chancellor  
Concordia University  
Montreal, Quebec

July 24, 2015

Dear President Shepard:

We are writing to ask that Concordia University retract the report commissioned, financed and published by Concordia and the Luc Beauregard Centre of Excellence in Communications Research at Concordia's John Molson School of Business entitled "[Lessons from the Quebec Asbestos Industry: Can there be meaningful dialogue and consensus when facts come up against feelings?](#)".

The report is replete with inaccuracies and bias. It fails to meet the most minimal academic standards and brings dishonor on Concordia. The report promotes the discredited message that the asbestos industry has been putting forward for decades that chrysotile asbestos can be safely used and that exposure to chrysotile asbestos at levels ten times higher than permitted in Western countries causes no harm to health. This message has been utterly rejected and condemned as dangerous and irresponsible nonsense by Quebec's, Canada's and the international scientific community.

Not a single reputable scientific body in Quebec, Canada or the world supports the position put forward by the asbestos industry and by the author of the report, John Aylen. Yet, in complete denial of the facts, Mr. Aylen claims that the scientific evidence supports the asbestos industry.

Mr. Aylen was hired by Baljit Chadha and an asbestos consortium to help obtain a loan from the Quebec government in order to open the Jeffrey underground asbestos mine. Mr. Aylen teaches Business Communications and Integrated Marketing Communications at Concordia's John Molson School of Business and runs a public relations and corporate communications firm. In his report, Mr. Aylen acknowledges the "gracious and generous contributions" of Baljit Chadha (to whom Aylen gives the name Mr Barry Smith) and expresses gratitude for "the dedicated assistance of Mr. Guy Versailles". Versailles owns a public relations company that was also hired by Mr. Chadha to help secure the government loan for the asbestos consortium.

### **1) Failure to declare conflict of interest**

In his report, which Concordia puts forward as supposedly being an independent report of high academic quality, Mr. Aylen does not disclose his conflict of interest in that he played a key role in the events he is reporting as a hired consultant and spokesperson for Mr. Chadha to help advance the asbestos project. Nor does he disclose Mr. Versailles' conflict of interest in having also been a paid consultant working for Mr. Chadha during the events covered by the report.

### **2) Inaccurate information**

The report repeats the familiar inaccurate information that the asbestos industry has been putting forward for years. As just one example, the asbestos industry and Mr. Aylen claim that the World Health Organization (WHO) supports the use of chrysotile asbestos. This is inaccurate. The [WHO has for the past decade called for an end to the use of chrysotile asbestos](#) as the most effective way to prevent asbestos-related diseases. Mr. Aylen has been provided with this information, but continues to misrepresent the position of the WHO. [The WHO has already chastised Mr. Aylen's client, Mr. Chadha](#), for disseminating this misinformation.

### **3) Rejection of reputable scientific evidence**

Mr. Aylen dismisses the conclusions of all the leading scientific experts on harm caused by chrysotile asbestos, including the Quebec government's National Public Health Institute (INSPQ), Quebec's sixteen directors of public health, the Quebec Medical Association, the Quebec Cancer Society, the Quebec Public Health Association, the WHO, the International Agency for Research on Cancer, the International Joint Policy Committee of Societies of Epidemiology, the Collegium Ramazzini, the International Commission on Occupational Health, the International Social Security Association, the World Federation of Public Health Associations, to name just some.

Instead, Mr. Aylen puts forward a tiny handful of scientists, who have been helping the asbestos industry to promote chrysotile asbestos use for years. Mr. Aylen does not mention the fact that most of these scientists have financial ties to the asbestos industry and that their pro-asbestos conclusions have been rejected as worthless by independent, reputable scientists.

Mr. Aylen claims that all the medical and public health experts who opposed the opening of the Jeffrey mine were ignorant and ill-informed and used emotion, not facts. Mr. Aylen claims that the proponents of the Jeffrey mine engaged in a highly rational, science driven approach based on facts.

The evidence shows the exact opposite to be the case.

### **4) Irresponsible promotion of harm to public health**

Aylen argues that exposure of up to 1 fibre of chrysotile asbestos per cubic centimeter of air (1 f/cc) causes no harm to health. This level is ten times higher than is permitted in the USA, European countries and the Canadian provinces. In Quebec, the CCST calls for zero exposure to any asbestos fibres. Not a single scientific body in the world supports Mr. Aylen's position. Mr. Aylen has no scientific or medical credentials; he is simply parroting the asbestos industry's position. His conduct is irresponsible and promotes harm to public health.

### **5) Omission of critical information**

Mr. Aylen claims that chrysotile asbestos is being safely used around the world. Only the asbestos industry and those with financial ties to the industry make this claim. It is utter nonsense. As the WHO states, the evidence shows the exact opposite to be true and safe use is not possible. The Quebec asbestos industry claimed that the asbestos it exported was being

handled under strict safety controls overseas. This was exposed as false with evidence showing workers in India handling Quebec asbestos with their bare hands and children outside the biggest asbestos cement factory in Indonesia handling broken pieces of asbestos cement and [using discarded Quebec asbestos sacks](#).

## **6) Abusive conduct**

Mr. Aylen claims that those opposing the use of asbestos used ugly, intimidating tactics, while the proponents of the asbestos industry conducted themselves according to high standards. Once again, the evidence shows the opposite to be true.

Those opposing the re-opening of the Jeffrey mine were predominantly medical and public health experts, who put forward reputable, scientific evidence and appealed to moral values to support the WHO and not export asbestos and cause harm to countless people.

Numerous medical doctors, health experts, asbestos victims and human rights advocates asked McGill University and the Canadian Red Cross to call for Roshi Chadha to resign from their boards, since she was director of a company exporting asbestos, denying the scientific evidence and contributing to harm of health of people overseas. In the view of the writers, this was in contradiction with the values and mission of the university and the public health organization she was supposed to promote.

Contrary to Mr. Aylen's accusation, this is not bullying. This is called accountability for one's actions, which is the foundation of human rights and democracy.

All communication by the opponents of the project, including communication with Mr. Aylen himself, was respectful and courteous. Mr. Aylen does not provide a single piece of evidence of the contrary.

The evidence shows, however, that the proponents of the Jeffrey mine used ugly slurs and scurrilous, personal attacks on those who opposed the project. Bernard Coulombe, owner of the Jeffrey mine, is one of the four proponents listed by Mr. Aylen and is called Bernard Pigeon by Mr. Aylen. Mr. Coulombe insulted public health scientists working for the INSPQ, calling them in the media "the little gang of Talibans of the INSPQ" (« [la petite gang de talibans de l'Institut national de santé publique](#) »).

Mr. Chadha made an ugly attack on a delegation of public health advocates and asbestos victims who came to Quebec from Asia to appeal to Quebec to stop exporting asbestos. Mr. Chadha accused them on CBC radio of being corrupt and being paid by vested interests. He refused their written [request to withdraw and apologize for his ugly, unwarranted slur](#) and he refused their request for a meeting.

Jacques Dunnigan is one of the four proponents listed by Mr. Aylen and has worked for decades for the asbestos lobby organisation (the Chrysotile Institute). Mr. Dunnigan [launched a vicious public attack](#) on the delegation from Asia, accusing them of being corrupt, putting forward lies, and being paid by vested interests. Mr. Dunnigan made mocking, cruel remarks about Rachel

Lee, a member of the delegation, accusing her of falsely claiming to have mesothelioma. She died within a year of her mesothelioma. She was distraught and devastated by the public attack made on her by Mr. Dunnigan in a Quebec newspaper. In his sneering attack, Mr. Dunnigan not only [displayed his complete medical ignorance of mesothelioma](#), he also displayed unconscionable inhumanity.

## CONCLUSION

The claim by Mr. Aylen that the arguments of the asbestos industry were based on science and those of the opponents were based on emotion is ludicrous and completely at variance with the facts.

Concordia and Mr. Aylen have put forward the report as a model to provide guidance to other industries involved in controversial projects. Far from providing model guidance, the report is ignorant and biased. It is harmful to public policy and to the practice of public relations in Quebec and elsewhere. It brings dishonour on Concordia University.

It is also of concern to us that the report promotes the asbestos trade, now largely controlled by Russia. It should be noted that the lobby organisation for the global asbestos industry (the International Chrysotile Institute, ICA) is incorporated in and located in Quebec. The ICA continues to play a leading role in defeating bans on asbestos in low and middle income countries where asbestos is today being exported. In May this year, Russia and the ICA played a critical role in blocking minimal safety protections regarding chrysotile asbestos under the UN Rotterdam Convention. Four of the five ICA lobbyists attending the Geneva conference were from Quebec, including Mr. Clément Godbout, one of the four asbestos proponents listed in Mr. Aylen's report. Most of the funding for ICA's activities, such as defeating the Rotterdam Convention in Geneva, apparently comes from the Russian asbestos industry, which is responsible for three quarter of the world's asbestos trade.

Mr. Aylen's report not only improperly eulogizes the role he and his client, Mr. Chadha, played in promoting the opening of the Jeffrey underground asbestos mine. It also serves the interests of the global asbestos industry by providing a report, commissioned, funded and published by a Quebec university, which claims that the scientific evidence supports use of chrysotile asbestos.

We call on Concordia University to retract the report because of its gross inaccuracies and bias and because it promotes the global asbestos trade, which the medical and scientific community have condemned as morally indefensible.

We would be glad to provide additional information and request your immediate attention to this urgent matter.

Sincerely,

**KATHLEEN RUFF**, senior human rights adviser, Rideau Institute, Ottawa; author, *Exporting Harm: how Canada Markets Asbestos to the Developing World*

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**DR. COLIN L. SOSKOLNE**, Professor Emeritus, University of Alberta, Edmonton; Adjunct Professor [July 1, 2013 - June 30, 2016], Faculty of Health, University of Canberra, Australia; Chair, International Joint Policy Committee of the Societies of Epidemiology (IJPC-SE); Fellow, Collegium Ramazzini, Italy

**NOTE:** Titles and affiliations are given for identification purposes only.

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