

Continuing failure of Canadian universities to address industry influence and undisclosed conflicting interests. The example of asbestos.

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Economic power of the asbestos industry

- **Canada was a leading world producer and exporter of asbestos throughout the past century.**
 - **For decades, the global asbestos lobby has been based in Canada.**
 - **It is easy to resist industry influence when it is not present.**
- **The test is whether universities resist industry influence when it is present.**
- **Canadian universities have a high global reputation for upholding scientific and ethical standards.**

THE TEST QUESTION THEREFORE IS:

- ***Have Canadian universities resisted asbestos industry influence?***

Asbestos industry sought liaison with a university

- In 1965, concerned by increasing scientific evidence of harm caused by asbestos, the Quebec Asbestos Mining Association (QAMA) sought an "alliance with some university such as McGill for example, so that authoritative background for publicity can be had."
- Copying the strategy of the tobacco industry, in 1966 QAMA created a pseudo-scientific front organization to whitewash asbestos - the Institute of Occupational & Environmental Health.
- The Institute's purpose was to be "independent of any other institution – university or governmental – so that its policy can be determined by the needs of the industry."
- The Institute's Board members were the owners of the asbestos mines.
 - The Institute's purpose was to serve industry interests.

Asbestos industry chose McGill University

- **In 1966 QAMA's Institute of Occupational & Environmental Health gave Prof. Corbett McDonald of McGill University a million dollars to carry out epidemiological research at QAMA's asbestos mines.**
- **These funds enabled McGill University to create a Department of Epidemiology with McDonald as its chair.**
 - **McDonald's studies concluded that chrysotile asbestos is “virtually innocuous” and he argued that the workers' asbestos-related diseases must have been caused by something else.**
 - **Despite repeated requests, McDonald and McGill have never produced the data on which McDonald based his conclusions.**
 - **No other scientist, except scientists with financial ties to the asbestos industry, has duplicated McDonald's findings.**

McDonald promoted the industry's interests by opposing stricter safety standards for workers

- **McDonald and the asbestos industry defeated efforts by asbestos miners in Quebec and Newfoundland who went on strike for stricter exposure regulations.**
 - **In 1972, when testifying, alongside the asbestos industry, against proposed stricter asbestos exposure standards at an OSHA hearing, McDonald stated the following falsehood:**
“I do not work, nor am I associated with any asbestos producer or manufacturer.”

McDonald helped the asbestos industry by promoting asbestos use

- **McDonald argued against bans or restrictions on chrysotile asbestos and promoted its use in developing countries.**
- **In 1986 McDonald, together with the Asbestos Institute, denounced plans by the US Environmental Protection Agency to ban asbestos.**
 - **In 1998 McDonald testified at a World Trade Organization tribunal that countries should not have the right to ban chrysotile asbestos.**
 - **In 1999, McDonald testified in Brazil against a proposed ban on asbestos.**
- **McDonald's work continues to be used by the global asbestos industry to deny harm of chrysotile asbestos and promote its use.**

McGill asked to investigate improprieties

- **In 2012, McGill was asked to carry out an independent, transparent investigation of improprieties and asbestos industry influence over McDonald's work.**
- **McGill's research integrity officer (RIO) carried out an internal review and decided there should not be an investigation.**

- **McGill subsequently issued a report stating:**

- 1) McGill's RIO found no improprieties and no investigation was needed.**
- 2) Debate about asbestos “continues to rage” today.**
- 3) McDonald always disclosed his industry ties.**
- 4) McDonald played a major role in stopping the use of asbestos.**
- 5) McDonald's findings have been replicated by “other groups”.**

McGill's investigation demonstrates an absence of ethical oversight

- **McGill's “review” lacked independence, transparency and credibility.**
- **McGill's internal review served to cover up wrongdoing.**
- **McGill's findings are in complete contradiction with the evidence.**
- **This case demonstrates asbestos industry influence over McGill.**
 - **This case demonstrates the lack of any independent mechanism to address the problem of industry influence and conflict of interest.**

Concordia University also demonstrates improper influence of asbestos industry

- **Concordia University and McGill University are the two major English-speaking universities in Quebec.**
- **In 2010 a consortium of investors sought a \$58 million loan from the Quebec government to re-open a Quebec asbestos mine and export vast amounts of asbestos to developing countries.**
- **The leader of the consortium, Baljit Chadha, and his wife, Roshi Chadha (both presidents of companies exporting asbestos from Quebec) sat on the Board of Governors of Concordia and McGill universities.**
 - **Baljit Chadha made significant financial donations to Concordia's John Molson School of Business, was named Governor Emeritus and had an auditorium named in his honour.**
- **A lecturer at Concordia's School of Business, John Ayles, was hired as a public relations consultant by Chadha to promote Chadha's asbestos project.**

Concordia University publishes a report supporting the asbestos trade

- **The Quebec Medical Association, all Quebec's Directors of Public Health, and the scientific community strongly opposed Chadha's project.**
- **In 2014 Concordia University commissioned, funded, published and praised a report which eulogized Chadha (a Governor Emeritus and major donor to the university) and eulogized his project to export asbestos.**
 - **The report stated that the scientific evidence supports use of chrysotile asbestos and those who opposed the project acted irrationally, unethically and emotionally.**
- **The report was written by John Ayles. There was no disclosure that he had been hired by Chadha as a consultant to promote the asbestos mine.**
- **There was no disclosure that Chadha was a Governor Emeritus and major donor to Concordia University.**

Complaint made to Concordia University of scientific and ethical improprieties

- **A complaint was submitted to Concordia University challenging the Report's scientific misinformation, industry influence and undisclosed Conflict of Interest.**
- **Concordia was asked to retract the Report, which contributes to public harm, and carry out an independent, transparent investigation as to how such serious violations of academic integrity occurred.**
 - **Concordia refused to do so.**
- **Instead, Concordia carried out a secretive, internal pretense of an “investigation” whereby Concordia's School of Business “investigated” itself.**

Concordia University's secret “investigation” condoned the wrongdoing

- **No information about the supposed “investigation” or its report was made public.**
 - **No action was taken, apart from a vague, facile statement that Concordia had addressed the conflict of interest issue. No details were provided.**
 - **The report was not retracted.**
 - **Instead, Concordia extolled its publication of harmful scientific misinformation as being “the essence of academic freedom.”**

Test Question: *Have Canadian universities succumbed to asbestos industry influence?*

Answer: YES

- **Canada is considered to have as good or better academic standards as other countries to prevent corruption by vested interests.**
- **As the IJPC-SE Position Statement on Asbestos says, the scientific evidence is overwhelming that all asbestos is harmful and should be banned.**
- **Quebec, Canada, has been a leading asbestos exporter and the location of the global asbestos lobby.**
 - **Quebec's two major English-speaking universities were contaminated by and continue to be contaminated by asbestos industry influence.**
 - **The academic community has shown indifference to this contamination of two leading Canadian universities by industry influence.**
 - **No mechanism of recourse exists.**
- **Thus the contamination is legitimized by non-action.**

Academia is a multi-billion industry but fails to adequately address conflicting interests

- At the end of the day, ethics are key to science and to public health.
 - Without a serious, effective system of ethical oversight, evidence and public policy are being easily corrupted by vested interests.
- Overwhelming evidence of this has been provided by: the tobacco industry, the asbestos industry, the fossil fuel industry, the chemical industry, the fast food industry, the mining industry, the sweetened beverage industry, the lead industry, the list is endless.

Conclusion: **Action is needed**

It is time for our universities to recognize the seriousness of this problem and put in place a mechanism of transparent, independent oversight with a mandate to minimize improper industry influence if the integrity of science is to be upheld.