

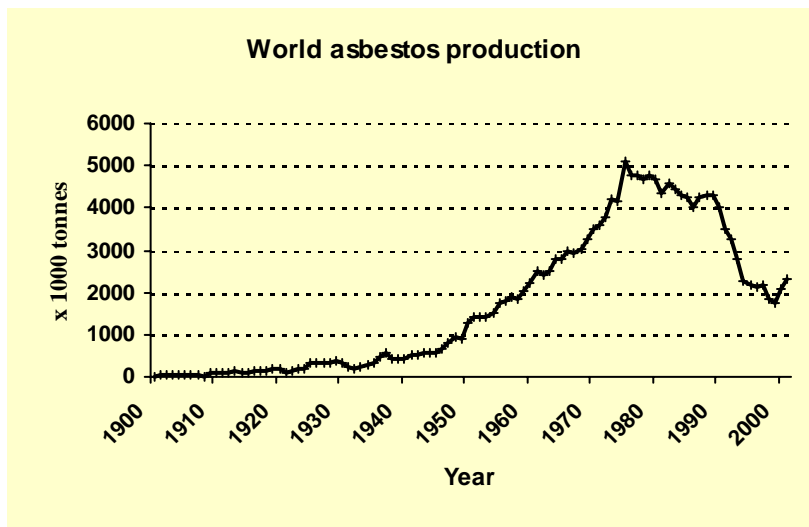


Warning: asbestos production on the increase!¹

There is a clear international scientific consensus that asbestos in all its varieties (amphiboles or chrysotile) is a proven carcinogen in humans, even at low doses.

Asbestos mining peaked in 1975

Nevertheless, over 200 million tonnes of asbestos are estimated to have been used throughout the world over the last 140 years, for extremely varied purposes. Asbestos mining developed in the 19th century with the discovery of substantial deposits in South Africa, Canada and Russia. Other major deposits are found in Brazil, Zimbabwe, China, Italy, Colombia, Greece, India, United States of America, Australia, Germany and France. In around 1900, the amount mined throughout the world was around 30 000 tonnes per year. Asbestos mining expanded steadily and peaked in 1975, a record year, when almost five million tonnes of asbestos were mined (Fig. 1).



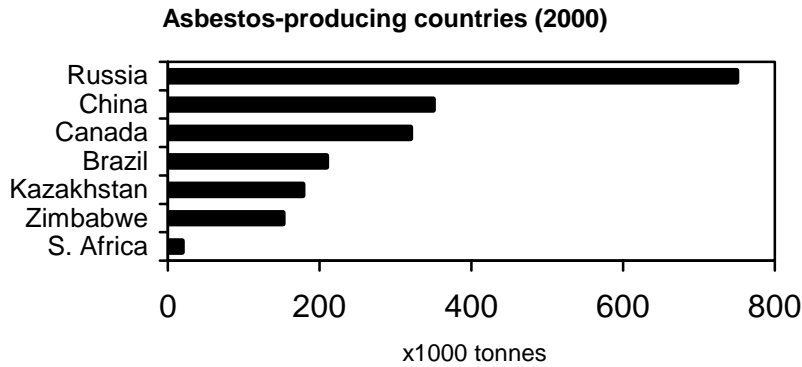
From the 1970s onwards, the general realization of the serious risks associated with working with asbestos led more and more countries to adopt increasingly strict measures to protect workers, followed by bans on the use of asbestos, sometimes with temporary exceptions for cases where substitution still presented some technical difficulties.

Production and export

After 1975, the risks associated with the inhalation of asbestos dust, including chrysotile asbestos, were all well known, and asbestos consumption declined to under three million

¹ Philippe Huré, National Research and Safety Institute (*Institut national de recherche et de sécurité* (INRS)), France.

tonnes by around 1995. The countries of the former USSR, China, Canada and Brazil are still the main producers today; Canada is still the largest world exporter (Fig. 2).

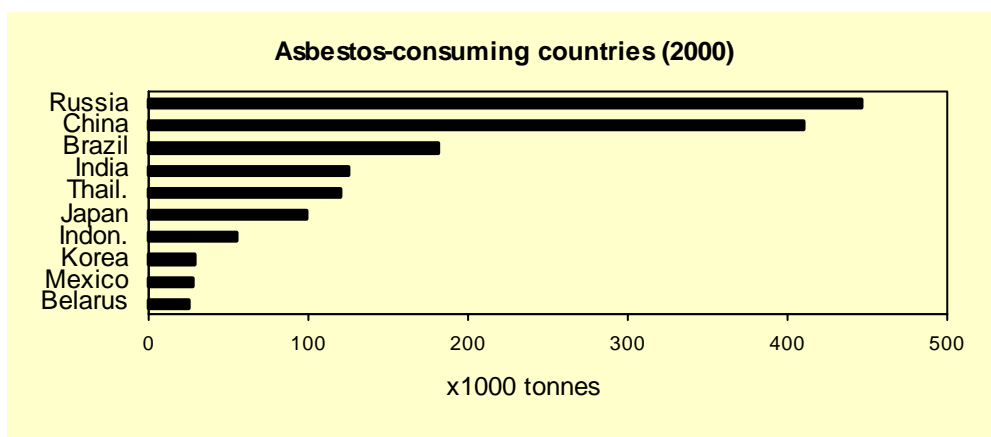


The quantity of asbestos mined throughout the world is currently between two and three million tonnes each year.

Today, the use of asbestos which accompanied the industrial development of the 20th century has created a health crisis on an international scale and is directly responsible for tens of thousands of deaths throughout the world every year. The devastating health effects of asbestos appear several decades after exposure; hundreds of thousands of deaths from cancer will inevitably occur over the coming decades as a result of occupational, domestic or environmental exposure.

World asbestos production: on the increase again

Today, fast-growing countries are developing their fledgling economies by strengthening their asbestos mining or processing industries; they are looking for new markets connected with asbestos. Consequently, total world asbestos production, which had been declining sharply owing to the fall in consumption in the most industrialized countries, has been on the increase again over the last few years, despite the clear international scientific consensus about the dangers of asbestos (Fig. 3).



All the industrialized countries which have used asbestos extensively, without exception, have seen an explosive increase in the number of cases of disease. In the long term, these countries face the difficulty of deciding what the total cost of compensation for these diseases will be and how long the phenomenon will last: although studies predict – very approximately – a provisional annual number of malignancies, there is no formula for

calculating the financial impact of the other diseases connected with exposure to asbestos, which affect far more people than cancer does.

Compensation for disease: an economic time-bomb

The overall cost of caring for the victims of these diseases is so high that it is seriously destabilizing the systems of compensation for occupational diseases in some countries; States are obliged to pay compensation, and some enterprises have been reduced to bankruptcy. To give a few examples, the French and German systems each spend over one billion euros every year on compensation for these diseases; in the United States of America, almost 50,000 people every year lodge a complaint connected with an asbestos-related disease. United States insurance companies had paid out 21.6 billion US dollars for such claims by 2000; in addition, 32 billion US dollars were paid out by enterprises which had been prosecuted. Compensation claims in the United States of America could amount to 260 billion US dollars.

Countries using asbestos today will eventually and inevitably have to pay the enormous bill resulting from the health and economic impact of asbestos exposure: there is a close correlation between the number of victims and the level of asbestos use over the previous 20-30 years. Thus, using asbestos now imposes a burden on a country's economy for over 30 years, bequeathing to future generations the responsibility for compensating victims and the financial burden of caring for them.

The duty to warn

No country in the world, however developed or otherwise its social protection system may be, can ignore the health and economic issues involved in the continued use of asbestos. Countries which have introduced a ban on asbestos have a duty to warn others of the seriousness of these issues and to share their knowledge in order to assist the thinking of consumer countries, which will, sooner or later, have to exchange the economic argument for using asbestos for the health argument for banning it.