

Brazil Should Not Host the ICOH Congress in 2003

The International Commission on Occupational Health (ICOH) hosts an International Congress every three years. The next Triennial ICOH Congress is slated to meet in Iguassu Falls, Brazil, February 23-28, 2003. There are many reasons why the ICOH Congress should not be welcomed in our country. I ask you to consider the following.

ICOH is a private organization of occupational health and safety professionals, primarily multinational corporate medical doctors. The stated purpose of the organization is to spread scientific information throughout the world.¹ It primarily does this through a group of Scientific Committees that hold their own conferences and publish documents. Ideally, ICOH could serve as a source of unbiased scientific expertise from the international scientific community. Unfortunately, the ICOH has a long and regrettable history of failure to provide unbiased scientific information.

The ICOH has not been an unbiased source of information in the development of some very significant scientific documents. This is particularly true in the areas of asbestos and other fibers, and with some of the chemicals and pesticides. Many ICOH members are employees of corporations or consultants to industry. When called upon as experts, they often avoid the suggestion of a conflict of interest by stating that they are “representatives” of ICOH. Some of the Scientific Committees of ICOH are dominated by industry-affiliated members and have been for many years. Few independent scientists and representatives of developing countries become members of the committees dealing with contested issues. Scientific committee members then “represent” the ICOH at meetings around the world, often misleading developing countries about the products manufactured by the companies that those ICOH members actually represent.²

A number of recent journal articles by Giannasi and Thebaud-Mony, Castleman and Lemen, Grandjean, LaDou, Richter and Berman, and Watterson, disclose activities of the ICOH, and point out the many areas where the ICOH fails in its supposed commitment to occupational health.²⁻⁷ A group of international leaders in occupational health including the Secretary General of the Collegium Ramazzini, Cesare Maltoni of Italy, reviewed the history of ICOH activities in an effort to stop the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Labour Office (ILO) from accepting experts from the ICOH to participate on scientific committees.⁸ The reason for their position is that ICOH plays a key role in the development of scientific documents and policy recommendations on asbestos and other materials.

You should consider the recent embarrassment ICOH caused the ILO over the now-discredited and rejected document the ICOH Scientific Committee

on Fibers developed for publication by the ILO entitled “Health Effects of Natural and Synthetic Fibers.” It is an illuminating example of some of the activities in which the ICOH is engaged.

ICOH and the Asbestos Industry

An international meeting was held in March of 1994 in São Paulo, Brazil. The meeting called for a global asbestos ban. The conference was held in a very tense atmosphere. The Canadian government, the French Asbestos Committee, and Brazilian asbestos manufacturers were outspoken in their opposition to the meeting. Events leading up to this meeting explain why.

The ILO was approached in 1993 by the International Fiber Safety Group (IFSG) to hold training workshops in Brazil and Mexico to train specialists in the reading of chest X-rays. The year before, ILO had held such workshops in Prague, with participation of doctors from South America and support from the IFSG. IFSG offered to bear most of the cost of the Latin American workshops. IFSG's representative was Scott Houston, who actually worked in Quebec as the Director of the Asbestos Institute, an industry association. IFSG was created as a result of agreements within the international asbestos industry, though its exclusive representation of asbestos interests was obscured by its name. Inside the ILO, the agreements with IFSG were handled by longtime asbestos industry representative Michel Lesage.⁴

Lesage, introduced at the Brazil conference as a medical expert from the ILO, was also a member of the Board of Directors of ICOH, and a spokesman for the asbestos industry. Lesage was previously an official of the Quebec Asbestos Mining Association and has since returned to Canada. He spoke against the proposed asbestos ban.⁹ His statements at the conference surprised participants who expected the ILO to have a position distinct from that of the asbestos industry. Lesage advanced the concept of “controlled use” of asbestos, safe practices that turn out to be a fiction in the developing countries where regulations are seldom enforced and voluntary standards are almost never implemented or monitored.

Marianne Saux , also an ICOH Board member, was introduced in Brazil as a labor expert representing the French Ministry of Labor. She was actually an employee of Saint-Gobain corporation, an asbestos manufacturer, a fact known to her ICOH colleagues but made public only after an investigative journalist wrote a book in France about the asbestos industry and its international dimensions.¹⁰ The March, 1994 meeting was followed within months by a meeting in Brazil jointly sponsored by ILO and the asbestos industry (as IFSG).

A group of experts was convened in 1994 on the island of Jersey to prepare a review on chrysotile asbestos. The purpose of the meeting was to do a

risk assessment for chrysotile asbestos. There was considerable controversy over the continued mining and manufacture of chrysotile. Then, as now, the asbestos industry took the position that chrysotile was safe if used in “controlled conditions”. According to the invitation, the meeting was jointly sponsored by the ICOH and the IPCS. As it later became apparent, representatives of asbestos companies were involved in the planning and covered the expenses for the meeting. Some of the speakers were aware of the industry support, others not.³

A monograph on fibrous materials was subsequently prepared for ILO by the ICOH Scientific Committee on Fibers. The monograph was distributed by ILO to scientific reviewers in August of 1997. Experts on asbestos (among them William Nicholson, Morris Greenberg, and John Dement) noted with dismay that the asbestos chapter was written by Jacques Dunnigan, longtime Director for Health and Environment for the Asbestos Institute, and the editor-in-chief was Graham Gibbs, another member of the ICOH Board of Directors and perennial representative of the Canadian asbestos industry. Nicholson, Greenberg, and Dement declined to review chapters of the draft ILO report, not wanting to have their names associated with it.⁴ Strong protests from unions in the United Kingdom, the Nordic countries, and the United States followed, along with criticism from scientists. ILO judiciously withdrew the report from consideration as an ILO publication.

ICOH Vice President Bengt Knave expressed surprise to learn of the asbestos controversy in January of 1998. He stated that ICOH guidelines require that documents developed by scientific committees be submitted to the officers of ICOH before publication, and alleged that no such report had been received by the officers. Responding to a letter from Barry Castleman, Knave acknowledged, “I agree with you that if the name and reputation of ICOH have been improperly used in this matter, it falls to the officers of ICOH to sanction the responsible individuals, publicly set the record straight, and take steps to assure that similar things cannot recur in the future”.¹¹ No such sanction has occurred, and the ICOH has stonewalled any further discussion of the controversy. Knave brushed off concerns in closing a subsequent letter by saying, “I take it this letter brings to a conclusion our discussions, which arose out of a document that does not exist.”¹²

In an effort to understand how the draft fibers report was prepared by ILO “in cooperation with” ICOH, Barry Castleman requested the ILO provide a copy of the cover letter that accompanied the monograph when it was delivered to the ILO by the ICOH Scientific Committee on Fibers. The Chief of the Occupational Safety and Health Branch at ILO, who also is an ICOH member, has not acceded to repeated efforts by Castleman to obtain the document.

ICOH President Jean-Francois Caillard presided over an ICOH meeting in Nice, France in 1996. He introduced and praised J. P. Beffa, President of Saint-Gobain, in gratitude for support to the ICOH meeting given by the asbestos

company. When the ICOH officers and board members later met in Paris, they convened in the Saint-Gobain boardroom, as did the officers of all the Scientific Committees.² Later, at an address before the French Society for Occupational Medicine, Caillard acknowledged that asbestos, with an estimated 2000 deaths annually, had been a “health catastrophe” for France.¹³

ICOH and the Chemical Industry

In an example of the ICOH representation of industry interests, Watterson reported that ICOH activity on pesticides clearly reflected an industry orientation.⁸ The ICOH Scientific Committee on Pesticides has, in workshops and conferences, and even in organizational funding, worked closely with the agrochemical industry on occupational health and safety issues. Many ICOH members are employed by major companies that either now or in the recent past produced or marketed agrochemicals or by companies with agrochemical interests.¹⁴ BASF, DuPont, Dow, Union Carbide, Rhone Poulenc, Roussel Uclaf, BP, Scherring, Akzo Nobel, Bayer, ICI, Zeneca, Unocol, Enichem, Ciba Geigy, PPG Industries, Otsuka, Mobil, Shell, WR Grace, Monsanto and Rohm and Haas all support ICOH members.

Since the early 1970s, there has been substantial international work on alternative methods of cultivation, pesticide use reduction strategies, and integrated pest and crop management programs to protect the environment. These strategies reduce risks to health by reducing pesticide use and exposure. They are, for many regions of the world, the major starting points for improved occupational and environmental health. Although the agrochemical industry has acknowledged the value of such approaches, it prefers not to discuss them. Consistent with the industry orientation of the Scientific Committee on Pesticides, these approaches have been neglected if not ignored by virtually all ICOH meetings and conferences.

Many of the participants at the workshop on pesticides organized in 1986 by ICOH were from agrochemical companies, FBC, ICI (2), Dow, Shell (4), Ciba Geigy, Bayer (2): none came from the ILO, and none represented NGOs or trade unions.⁶ Physicians and occupational hygienists working for or with NGOs and trade unions concerned about pesticide exposure were not participants. Issues the agribusiness multinationals found undesirable were ignored. The research interests in agrochemicals and sustainable agriculture of independent academic and governmental representatives were not discussed.

Between 1993 and 1996, Dow Chemicals Europe was a sustaining member of ICOH. Prior to 1995 the ICOH Scientific Committee on Pesticides was chaired by an agrochemical company staff member and in 1994-95 the secretary of the group worked for the agrochemical company Zeneca UK. The 1994 pesticide workshop contained contributions from Zeneca Agrochemicals, and a

representative from the International Agrochemical Industry Group (GIFAP). There were no papers from non-industry NGOs and from workers' organizations that would have provided a very important and different perspective to the event. In 1998, the ICOH Scientific Committee on Pesticides once again sought to secure the financial support of industry. Contacts had already been made with the European Association of Agrochemical Manufacturers (ECPA) as partners in the initiative.

Secrecy Instead of Transparency

The ICOH Scientific Committee on Developing Countries developed a Long Range Agenda that was presented by Dr. Benito Reverente of the Philippines to the ICOH Board at its meeting in Stockholm, Sweden in 1996.¹⁵ The Agenda conveyed the opinion of the committee that, "The ICOH should devote a substantial portion of its activities and funds towards the needs of developing countries. Unfortunately at the present time, it does not."

The committee then took issue with the financial management of ICOH. "A significant portion of the ICOH Budget is spent for travel expenses of its officers and board members. There is no mechanism of approval or authorization from the ICOH Board or members who should exercise some form of control over such expenditures. In addition, there is no system requiring a detailed accounting of such expenses to a responsible ICOH body."

This open criticism of the financial activities of the ICOH was not well received by the officers and board members at the Board Meeting. The ICOH leaders were equally disturbed by the publication of the committee's Long Range Agenda in the International Journal of Occupational and Environmental Health. Although the ICOH publicly states that it favors transparency, the minutes of that meeting reflect that the officers and board members agreed that "...it is necessary to limit publication of similar documents in the future."¹⁶

ICOH officers and Board members publicly state their support of "transparency," but in the vast majority of their activities, they move with a secrecy provided by a conveniently protective Constitution and By-Laws. Repeated calls for changes to the Constitution and By-Laws of ICOH have met with hostility and rejection.¹⁶

ICOH and Brazilian Occupational Medicine

In a discussion of the failure of ICOH to provide leadership on the major issues of contemporary occupational and environmental health, Richter and Berman emphasized that professional societies derive their legitimacy by setting standards of performance and conduct.⁷ The ICOH has failed in this effort in a

number of crucial areas. Membership of the ICOH includes the names of some persons who have distinguished themselves for their efforts on behalf of workers and the public. Unfortunately, there are many ICOH members whose ties to industry result in conflicts of interest with the public health. Their rise to leadership in the organization has damaged the standing of the ICOH.

Many people present their ICOH membership as if the ICOH were an unbiased, independent, international consensus body, rather than a club whose members largely represent the private sector. This misunderstanding about the ICOH then allows its members to sit on a variety of scientific advisory groups despite the fact that they may represent industries and corporations. To many governments and professional organizations in developing countries, the ICOH credential confers an undeserved status. The recognition Brazil gives to the ICOH allows this conflicted representation to be made by any member in any part of the world. This official recognition of the ICOH compromises the accomplishments of Brazilian occupational medicine.

In view of all that the ICOH has recently done to jeopardize the field of occupational medicine, it is inappropriate for the ICOH to be honored by the occupational physicians of Brazil. ICOH has no verifiable policy of transparency, and has never made any serious attempt to deal with conflicts of interest. Because of the scientific community's growing awareness of the recent activities of the ICOH, the mere presence of ICOH observers at conferences is seen as supportive of industry interests. Barry Castleman recently reminded an ILO official that the "ICOH is an unreconstructed corporate front group", and it is one whose activities will compromise the development of occupational health and safety in Brazil.

Fernanda Giannasi
Occupational Health and Safety Administration
Brazilian Labor Ministry
Sao Paulo State, Brazil
Tel/FAX: 55 11 535-6017
E-mail: giannasi@telnet.com.br

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