Debate on industry influence on OH organizations/T.K. Joshi’s tantrums!

Sir,

T.K. Joshi’s letter in International Journal of Occupational and Environmental Health (IJOEH) is amusing and equally annoying to some of us who are closely connected with Indian Association of Occupational Health (IAOH) for several decades. He has been invited to a number of important meetings and has been even honoured by the same organization as late as this year when he was awarded the most coveted ADM oration! As a matter of fact, the IAOH has always gone out of the way and often at the displeasure of the asbestos industry to invite Dr. Joshi to candidly air his opinions, which he has done in our conferences, particularly in one seminar when I was the Chair for a debate on ignoring evidence of its harms. The report will enable the government to go to Rome in October 2008 and argue in favour of unrestricted trade of white asbestos under the Rotterdam Convention. India along with Canada and Russia is seen as the dirtiest player in the international negotiations to bring white asbestos in the prior informed consent (PIC) list of the convention, which will require exporting countries to obtain the prior consent of importing countries.

The study on which the ministry’s report is based is partly funded by the Asbestos Cement Product Manufacturers Association, which paid Rs. 16 lakh, whereas the government paid Rs. 43.66 lakh. What surprised occupational safety campaigners is the agency that conducted the study, the NIOH, which in the past has come out with studies defending workers’ health.

The study’s terms of reference reveal the government’s intent. Here is what the ministry’s April 2006 letter demanded of NIOH: “The deliverables will include generation of data which would justify the safe standards of its usage and the reasons justifying its non-inclusion/or otherwise in the PIC ambit.” The minutes of an April 2007 meeting of the ministry’s review committee gave NIOH a sharper focus: “It will specifically indicate as to how technology has made working conditions better. The same will include relevant photographs showing protective measures being undertaken.” The minutes of the Review Committee obtained recently through Right to Information Act dated 19 December, 2006 reads: “The report will be finalised after due discussions with the asbestos industry.” Another meeting minutes dated

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Letter to Editor
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18 April, 2007 reports that “...the results of the study which was underway could not be shared [with public] till the same was finalised.”

On April 18, 2007, the review committee felt the report did not adequately address the industry’s requirements: “S Ganesan of ICC (Indian Chemical Council) and NIOH representatives will redraft/re-word the Kolkata report keeping in view the international sensitivities.” Ganesan’s claim for the job: expertise in championing the pesticide industry in international negotiations. Clearly, a scientific study that is finalized after discussion with the corporate interests is grossly conflict of interest ridden and deserves to be scrapped. It is now time for Indian Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine to take note of it as well.

I would be glad to know your views on the goings-on.

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...any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

-John Donne

Editor’s response

Dear Sir,

Thank you for your mail. Let me assure you that International Journal of Occupational and Environmental Health (IJOEM) is not silent on the issue. We are aware of the letter published in the said journal by Dr. T.K. Joshi from India. Dr. Joshi has misrepresented the issues and used false premises to defame the IAOH. We have our views on the bonafides and personal agenda of Dr. Joshi, which we are tackling separately.

Dr. Joshi is a member of the IAOH and was the Chair of scientific committee of the 51st National Conference of IAOH in Delhi prior to the IAOH’s formal stand on the issue. Based on scientific data, the Central Council of the association took a stand in the year 2003 in favour of Banning Asbestos. The association has not taken any financial support from any industry connected with asbestos after the decision. IJOEM has also supported the Ban Asbestos stand in the Editorial written by me in the issue of Vol. 5, No. 1, January-March 2001. Dr. T.K. Joshi has himself written an editorial in IJOEM Vol. 6, No. 3, July-September 2002 on “Precautionary principle and need to ban all forms of Asbestos use in India”. Now, how can he malign the IAOH and its commitment to advancing the ethical practice of occupational health in India?

In the light of the above, it is indeed surprising that Dr. Joshi has shot of a volley of blatantly misleading information. In the same note, he mentions about no one protecting his job. We wonder if all this is about personal glory or a genuine concern for the health of workers? I leave this for the readers to judge in the light of our response backed by evidence of Dr. Joshi utilizing IAOH’s support in his crusade against asbestosis. It may be pertinent to mention here that Dr. Joshi has continued to be associated with us and has accepted awards and invitations, in spite of holding such negative opinions about the association. We wonder what his ulterior motives are. We therefore feel that the views expressed by Dr. Joshi about the IAOH should be taken in the proper perspective and with a pinch of salt. To us in the IAOH, this is a case of a crusade going horribly wrong tinged, as it is with an ulterior motive of one individual projecting himself as a martyr at the altar of occupational health in India. It may win him “brownie points” and in his mind help in holding on to his chair at this institution with the so-called help and support of people outside the country, but it has portrayed Dr. Joshi’s institution, the IAOH and indeed the government in poor light - a stand unacceptable to the members of the IAOH.

With respect to the other issues raised by you regarding the functioning of NIOH and the Government of India, they do not fall in the ambit of the IAOH’s mandate and we would advise you to correspond with the concerned authorities and get their views. You may also like to take up the issue with the government and try to scientifically convince them rather than raking up such issues in scientific publications and politicising the scientific community.

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