

Trust us, we're experts!

Ever wondered who makes up those "asbestos isn't dangerous" and "RSIs are in your mind" stories?

Vernon Mogensen looks at the dangerous business of corporate spin and "voodoo science" and unearths science fiction masquerading as science fact.



Image: Dan Perkins

A 9 June 2001 feature in the *National Post* of Toronto, Canada, claims repetitive stress injuries (RSIs) aren't real, they are just the latest fad of hypochondriacs.

The reporter's main source was not an expert in RSIs, it was Edward Shorter, of the History of Medicine Department at the University of Toronto. He said: "The fact is that most of these people didn't have carpal tunnel syndrome. They had hysteria."¹

The article does not disclose that Shorter also holds

a position in the school's Psychiatry Department, which may account for his view that it's all in the worker's mind. The story is replete with erroneous assumptions and anecdotes that are typical of the corporate blame-the-victim spin. Science fiction masquerades as science fact.

This corporate line that RSIs are all in the worker's mind has a long and decidedly unscientific history. During the intense US Congressional battles over legislation to protect workers from computer-related safety and health problems in the 1980s – which finally

resulted in a new ergo standard this year, only for it to be immediately rescinded as a first act of the Bush administration² – corporate interests trotted out similar, pseudo-scientific canards to persuade legislators that workers' concerns had no basis in scientific fact.

The Computer and Business Equipment Manufacturers' Association (CBEMA) president, Vico E. Henriques, told a House Subcommittee in 1984: "Today we have fear, and it is fear that comes from a rapid change in the way of conducting our work and our lives. It also comes from some zealous and self-interested parties who create fear for their own advantage."³

While some corporate opponents of ergonomics use the trappings of scientific expertise to mislead us into believing that RSIs don't exist, others, like the Burlington Northern/Santa Fe Railway Company, use scientific methods in a far-fetched attempt to "prove" a genetic predisposition to carpal tunnel syndrome in order to deny the compensation claims of its disabled employees (*Hazards* 74).

What these contradictory and highly politicised uses of medical science share is the common desire by employers to minimise the costs of doing business by passing them on to labour. Economists and management gurus call these costs "externalities," because they shouldn't be counted as part

of the "normal" costs of doing business.

Either way, corporate interests and their advocates seek to use science to lend legitimacy to their specious claims that the cause of RSIs is beyond the employer's control.

To preserve the appearance of independence, corporate interests rely on think tanks and advocates to give their positions on science issues the imprimatur of objectivity.

The American Council on Science and Health (ACSH) was founded in 1978 by the corporate community with help from sympathetic scientists, who objected to the second opinion on science questions that was being provided to the public and government officials by newly formed public interest groups, including the Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), an independent group monitoring the corporate bias in science.

ACSH warned that "many of the existing 'consumer advocate' groups weren't giving either policy makers or consumers the balanced, accurate, scientific information they needed." It has issued industry-friendly output on issues as diverse as cancer risks from drycleaning chemicals (page 12) to compensation to dying smokers (www.acsh.org). It has the resources to get its message heard.

So, while this year the *National Post* calls RSIs the result of worker "hysteria," it praises ACSH's president,

Elizabeth Whelan, as "a leading US critic of junk science."⁴

Noting ACSH's close ties to industry, Dr. Samuel S. Epstein, the author of *The Politics of Cancer*, called Whelan a practitioner of "voodoo science."⁵

Whelan is critical of CSPI for setting up a website where anyone can check if scientists or organisations like hers have undisclosed industry ties. For example, ACSH has received support from corporate giants such as American Cyanamid Company, Anheuser-Busch, General Electric, Kraft, Inc., and Monsanto. This contributors list dates from a decade ago because the ACSH no longer publicly discloses its corporate donors.⁶

When CBEMA launched its 1984 public relations campaign to stave off a serious push by organised labour for a visual display terminal (VDT) safety law, CBEMA's Henriques asked ACSH "to work with us on the campaign." Henriques told Congress that the ACSH was an "independent scientific organisation." With the ACSH's imprimatur, CBEMA's position on the VDT safety and health issue was given the stamp of scientific legitimacy.⁷ But ACSH is not independent – it receives 70 per cent of its funding from the corporate community.

Another corporate-friendly think tank is the Cato Institute, based in Washington, DC. One of its key

targets has been the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), the US HSE, and its proposed ergonomics regulation in particular.

In a CATO policy commentary last year, Eugene Scalia – now President Bush's nominee for the powerful post of top Labor Department solicitor – criticised ergonomics as "junk science."

Scalia wrote: "OSHA wants to entrench the questionable science of ergonomics in a permanent rule. But no agency should be permitted to impose on the entire American economy a costly rule premised on a 'science' so mysterious that the agency itself cannot fathom it."⁸

Scalia blithely ignores, but should be well aware, that Congressional Republicans twice ordered the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) to evaluate whether or not OSHA's ergonomics regulation was based on sound science. NAS twice confounded the Republicans by saying "yes", the standard rested on a solid foundation of over 2,000 soundly conducted scientific studies of workplace conditions (*Hazards* 64).⁹

It is not hard to see why Scalia's science is so one-sided. As a partner at the Washington law firm of Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher, Scalia lobbied to defeat the OSHA ergonomics rule for his clients, including the United Parcel Service,

Anheuser-Busch, and the National Coalition on Ergonomics – an umbrella group representing over 300 businesses.

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Asbestos doesn't hurt you

Industry has limitless creativity when it comes to shirking responsibility for its dangerous business.

A brilliant new investigative book, *Trust us, we're experts!*, sub-titled "How industry manipulates science and gambles with your future," cites David Ozonoff, describing the defences used by the asbestos industry:

"Asbestos doesn't hurt your health. OK, it does hurt your health but it doesn't cause cancer. OK, asbestos can cause cancer, but not the kind this person got. OK, our kind of asbestos can cause cancer, but not the kind this person got. OK, our kind of asbestos can cause cancer, but not at the doses to which this person was exposed. OK, asbestos does cause cancer, and at this dosage, but this person got his disease from something else, like smoking. OK, he was exposed to our asbestos and it did cause his cancer, but we did not know about the danger when we exposed him, but the statute of limitations has run out. OK, the statute of limitations hasn't run out, but if we're found guilty we'll go out of business and everyone will be worse off. OK, we'll agree to go out of business, but only if you let us keep part of our company intact, and only if you limit our liability for the harms we have caused."

It is still happening. Defending Canadian government attempts to persuade Chile not to introduce an asbestos ban, a feature headed "Why ban asbestos?" in the *Globe and Mail* on 31 July 2001 said: "Asbestos as it is currently employed by Canadian manufacturers poses no risk to human health."

And on 9 July 2001, the *New York Times* revealed that a product marketed for 30 years by the multinational WR Grace & Company as "completely asbestos-free" contained up to 1 per cent asbestos. On 30 January 2001, the *Wall Street Journal* reported WR Grace "is considering seeking bankruptcy protection to gain control over escalating asbestos litigation."

Trust us, we're experts. Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber. Tarcher/Putnam. 2001. ISBN 1-58542-059-X. www.penguinputnam.com