

February 10, 2019

AMIANTO—ITALIA — CANADA – ASBESTOS

Honouring the victims of asbestos exposure in Italy and Canada

Background on visit to Ontario by a delegation from Casale Monferrato from April 7 – 15, 2019

A delegation from Casale Monferrato, Italy will visit Ontario from April 7 – 15, 2019. Casale Monferrato is a small city near Torino known around the world as an epicentre of asbestos disease. This visit is meant to show us in Ontario what can happen when hazardous exposures are not prevented; and also how a devastated city can come together to survive and then turn the page towards a better future. The focus will be on educational and mutual learning sessions, as we in Canada implement our own ban on asbestos starting in 2019. There is much that we can learn from their experience dealing with the complex legacy of asbestos.

The delegation will be hosted by our Amianto-Italia-Canada-Asbestos Committee, (affiliated with the Italian Fallen Workers Memorial Committee), Comitès (a major Italian community organizations), Asbestos Free Canada, and other organizations vitally interested in asbestos issues. The current sponsoring organizations are the Canadian Mesothelioma Foundation, Unifor, Canada's Building Trades Unions, the Provincial Building and Construction Trades Council of Ontario and the Labourers' International Union.

Many people in Ontario are familiar with the history of Italian-Canadian workers. From the late 19th century through the 1970s, hundreds of thousands of Italians came here seeking a better life for their families. They played an enormous role in building Canada's cities and generating wealth in our industries, especially in Ontario. And most of them did find a better life. Unfortunately, many of these workers paid the ultimate price and lost their lives at work. *The Italian Fallen Workers Memorial Wall*, (an affiliated project - <http://www.monumentoaicaduti.com/>), is a testament to just how significant these losses were — over 2000 of them, and counting.

When thinking about this aspect of Italian-Canadian history, most people have in mind the workplace incidents which led to traumatic injuries and immediate death. But there is another story to be told. It involves exposure to asbestos. This miracle substance was being extensively used in the Western world during the 1950s to 1970s, precisely at the time of the most significant post-War Italian immigration. This meant that wherever Italians went in the world — Belgium, France, Australia, Argentina, the United States **and Canada** — they found asbestos waiting for them in industry and construction. As new immigrant workers, the Italians were especially vulnerable to being put in harm's way and so often ended up in industries where asbestos was encountered daily.

Asbestos was also in use all over Italy. By far the worst hit was Casale Monferrato, a small city of 36,000 people east of Torino. A large asbestos cement factory operated there for 80 years, closing finally in 1988. Exposures in the workplace and throughout the city ultimately caused over 1000 cases of mesothelioma, an almost always fatal cancer linked only to asbestos. Even though it has been many years since the factory closed, there are still 50 new cases of mesothelioma annually in Casale Monferrato. There were also 1400

other asbestos disease cases in the city, mainly asbestosis and lung cancer. Imagine the impact of this level of disease and death on a small, tightknit city. Virtually no family went unscathed.

Meanwhile in Canada, many Italian Canadian workers were also exposed. We have now reached the likely maximum level of asbestos disease in Ontario from those post-War exposures — around 150 Ontarians are dying annually from mesothelioma and another 425 from lung cancer, many of these Italian-Canadians. Although there is no breakdown by nationality, we know that the Italian-Canadian community has been hard hit, especially in construction and industry in places like Sarnia, Peterborough, Toronto, Sault Ste. Marie, Sudbury, Elliot Lake and Hamilton.

WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM CASALE MONFERRATO

The people of Casale Monferrato have endured tremendous suffering. But they have also learned a lot. They are eager to share their experience with Canadians, especially with the Italian-Canadians who suffered a similar fate. They have significant expertise to offer Canada's asbestos affected community. This initiative will be part of a positive learning exchange, which will help us here in Canada make the necessary progress in mesothelioma health care, asbestos remediation and education and awareness. When the delegation from Casale Monferrato visits Ontario, they will be presenting on a wide range of issues of great importance here in Ontario:

- **Medical innovations** – The health professionals of Casale Monferrato have had to respond to a crushing number of mesothelioma cases in a small community. They have developed an integrated approach involving frontline physicians, psychological support to patients and families and a hospice. They are eager to share this experience with colleagues in Canada and to learn about the important innovations in treatment being achieved in our Canadian centres of excellence in mesothelioma treatment.
- **Educational programs on the hazards of asbestos** – Educators in Casale Monferrato have created world recognized educational programs in their schools, using innovative resources and media to engage teachers and students in passing on the lessons that have been so hard learned.
- **How one small community can mobilize to galvanize major progress on asbestos** – The community in Casale Monferrato has spear-headed initiatives in Italy to ban asbestos and deal with its complex legacy in the built environment there.
- **Eliminating asbestos from the urban environment** - At the civic level, their succession of Mayors and City Councillors have dedicated the past 25 years to cleaning up all the asbestos in Casale, an admirable but difficult process, yet one that has met with significant success. We face the same challenge here in Canada, as our government has just recently approved a federal ban on asbestos, effective December 30, 2018.

Making the transition from asbestos to a better future - Finally, the local community has worked together to develop a common vision for a clean, healthy city which welcomes the world to their beautiful region of Monferrato, now designated a part of one of the UNESCO World Heritage sites.

THE DELEGATION FROM CASALE MONFERRATO

The size of the delegation depends on our success in fundraising. The current delegation is listed below:

- **A member of the city council of Casale Monferrato** — who will meet Ontario community leaders, civic officials and elected representatives to discuss the impressive progress made by Casale in dealing with the physical legacy of asbestos; and to promote tourism and investment in the city. (We are trying to confirm the Mayor of Casale Monferrato as well, but so far her schedule does not permit a visit.)
- **The two Casale Monferrato oncologists** who have led the development of integrated treatment and palliative care for mesothelioma patients, and psychological and social support for them and

their families. They will participate in joint educational sessions with Canadian health professionals, especially to learn more about the innovations in mesothelioma treatment which we have achieved here.

- **A teacher and a high school student**, who will present to Ontario educators and students about their impressive educational initiatives around the hazards of asbestos. This will be particularly valuable in support of efforts here in Ontario to raise awareness of asbestos hazards.
- **Two labour leaders who have been in the leadership of the asbestos victims group of Casale Monferrato and their struggle in general**, who will present to and learn from Ontario victims, families and activists on how best to prevent hazardous exposures, protect victims, and further the awareness of the profound effect of this exposure.

SCHEDULE FOR THE VISIT

The delegation will arrive on Sunday, April 7, 2019 and depart Monday, April 15, 2019. The delegation will visit Toronto as well as additional Ontario cities hard hit by occupational disease – Peterborough and Sarnia. In each city, the delegation will be presenting on the issues outlined above, with Ontario wide sessions in Toronto. In Toronto, this will include a gathering on Saturday, April 13 of representatives from the main occupational disease clusters in Ontario, where we will discuss the experiences in Italy and Canada and the lessons learned.

There will be receptions for the delegation in each of the cities. In Toronto, the delegation will visit the *Memorial Wall* at the Columbus Centre in Toronto, honouring Italian-Canadians who have lost their lives at work in Ontario.

FUNDRAISING

We are still fundraising for the visit from Casale Monferrato. We're also fundraising to support travel for four people to Washington DC just before the Ontario tour – this will be for a special award by the Asbestos Disease Awareness Organization to Casale Monferrato oncologist Daniela Degiovanni for her four decades of work with asbestos disease patients; and for recognition of Canada's successful effort to achieve a ban on asbestos.

If you or your organization is interested in providing financial support for the visit from Casale Monferrato, contact Alec Farquhar at afarquhar7@gmail.com.