

Franco Cavallo, President of SISMEC
Editors of Epidemiology, Biostatistics and Public Health

October 9, 2015

Dear Professor Cavallo,

Thank you for your letter of October 5, 2015 in response to the serious concerns we have raised regarding the articles on asbestos by Ilgren et al. that were published earlier this year by SISMEC's journal, Epidemiology, Biostatistics and Public Health (EBPH).^{1,2}

We note and appreciate that SISMEC has expressed concern about the scientific content of the articles and has issued a warning to EBPH concerning the peer-review process employed. We welcome the fact that SISMEC will appoint an 'ad hoc' commission for the safeguard of the ethical principles of the Journal and of the peer review process.

As we requested in our earlier letters, we ask that SISMEC and EBPH adopt an open and transparent process with regard to the appointment of the commission, the determination of its terms of reference and time table, the reporting of its discussions and recommendations, and the implementation of its recommendations.

We are disappointed, however, that SISMEC is not taking stronger action in the face of the acknowledged serious scientific and ethical improprieties. It is important to recognize that the Balangero article is part of a long, continuing and shameful history of work by scientists paid by asbestos interests to deny and create doubt about the known harms caused by chrysotile asbestos.

We point out that this is not an issue involving an academic, scientific fine point. It involves an article that denies harm of chrysotile asbestos, helps the current sale of two million tons of chrysotile asbestos every year in developing countries, causing harm to the lives of vulnerable populations, and helps deny justice to workers already harmed by exposure to chrysotile asbestos. One of the authors, John Hoskins, as previously pointed out, is a paid representative of the asbestos industry, promoting its interests – a fact which is not disclosed in the article itself.

SISMEC should not tolerate, in our opinion, that its journal serves asbestos interests and endangers the health of populations. Surely there has already been sufficient wrongdoing in Italy and other countries with regard to distorting the evidence regarding asbestos risks and harming workers, without SISMEC adding to it?

We further note that SISMEC is requiring the Editors of EBPH to publish an erratum regarding false information contained in the Balangero article by Ilgren et al., which will blame the authors for having altered a citation and given a false presentation of what was actually written.

In our view, SISMEC as an oversight body, should be underlining the seriousness of the misconduct by Ilgren et al. in this matter. Either because of incompetence or, worse, because of deliberate deception, Ilgren et al. put forward false information in their original article. What is totally unacceptable in our opinion is the fact that, after their false information was pointed out to them

in the rebuttal by Magnani et al., Ilgren and his co-authors did not correct the false information in their response published by EBPH.

Refusing to correct false information, after it has been pointed out to the authors that it is false information, constitutes deliberate dishonesty and, in our opinion, is unacceptable conduct under even the lowest scientific and ethical standards. It is a betrayal of science and a betrayal of the public trust.

We point out that anyone who today downloads the Ilgren et al. Balangero article from the EBPH website receives the article with the false, uncorrected information and without disclosure of the authors' conflicting interests. It is only if one happens to search subsequent issues of EBPH that one learns of the Errata that were later published and the additional Erratum that will shortly be published.

In our opinion, SISMEC should not tolerate such gross misconduct. We ask that the article be retracted.

The test of whether a professional society, such as SISMEC, has ethical standards is whether it takes serious action in the face of serious wrongdoing, particularly wrongdoing that contributes to harm to health. An Erratum is not sufficient. It is the role of an oversight body such as SISMEC to be resolute in upholding the fundamental ethical principles to which it claims to aspire in the pursuit of truth.

We call on SISMEC to take the serious action of retracting the article.

Sincerely,

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Notes:

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*Please send responses to Kathleen Ruff, kruff@bulkley.net

Conflict of Interest Statement:

Roberta Pirastu, Maria Angela Vigotti, Guadalupe Madrid, Cuauhtémoc Pérez, Fernand Turcotte, Morris Greenberg, Lennart Hardell, T. Joshi, Rolf Petersen, Sanjay Chaturvedi, Annie Thébaud-Mony, Vilma Santanta, Mohamed Jeebhay, Lygia Budnik and Kathleen Ruff have no conflict of interest to declare. Elisabetta Chellini and Pietro Comba have served as a consultant for the Prosecutor in some criminal trials concerning asbestos and other environmental carcinogens. Francesco Forastiere has served as an expert witness for the Court in a trial for asbestos related mesotheliomas and has served as expert for the Judge in trials involving environmental contamination and occupational exposures. Xaver Baur has testified in occupational diseases litigation on behalf of plaintiffs and provides independent expert opinions for social courts or statutory insurances. Richard Lemen and Arthur Frank have been involved in asbestos litigation as expert witnesses on behalf of plaintiffs and serve as Co-Science Advisors to the Asbestos Disease Awareness Organization. Colin Soskolne has served as an expert witness between 2011 and 2013 on asbestos cases for plaintiff attorneys; all fees were donated to the University of Alberta.

References

1. Ilgren, EB, Pooley, FD, Kumiya, YM, Hoskins, JA, Critical reappraisal of Balangero chrysotile and mesothelioma risk, *Epidemiology, Biostatistics and Public Health* - 2015, Vol. 12, Number 1, DOI: 10.2427/10125.
2. Ilgren, EB, Van Orden, DR, Lee, Kamiya, Y, Hoskins, J, Further Studies of Bolivian Crocidolite -Part IV: Fibre Width, Fibre Drift and their relation to Mesothelioma Induction: Preliminary Findings, *EBPH* 2015, Vol. 12, Number 2, DOI: 10.2427/11167.