



## OPINION

### The business of health, the health of business

J Myers

My eye caught the *SAMJ* news piece<sup>1</sup> about a recent product of the World Business Coalition for Sustainable Development entitled 'The business of health, the health of business'.<sup>2</sup> I suspect this was because I have been thinking a lot about the quality (effectiveness and cost-effectiveness) of what goes for medical surveillance in the world of occupational medicine.

The glossy appearance of this publication<sup>2</sup> contrasts with the paucity of the evidence presented for the thesis that business can return a profit on its investment in workers' health. Of course this is a fine idea.

Investment in workers' health may be understood as having three drivers – financial, legal and moral. While the argument that financial investment yields a return is undeniably attractive, there is precious little hard evidence for this in the scientific literature. Indeed, few formal evaluations are ever conducted on which to base such a conclusion.

More typically, legal drivers force investment that is typically managed rather differently from investment in core business activities. Often this amounts to the bare minimum to get away with showing legal compliance. Many South African (and other) firms bear testimony to this with filing cabinets full of audiograms, spiograms, radiographs or occupational hygiene reports which are mostly ignored – unless grossly abnormal.

Moral drivers linked to social responsibility or the need to meet international benchmarks to make the business attractive on the global stage (and hence arguably partly financial) may be more effective, but even here formal evaluation of health interventions is rare.<sup>3</sup> One effect of moral drivers is for business to become more proactive with regard to various health interventions and programmes that are in the limelight, e.g. for HIV/AIDS.

Why then, you may ask, do organisations like the WBCSD exist? And what do they really achieve? A recent sociological policy analysis<sup>4</sup> of the engagement of business with environmental issues notes that 'the use of rhetoric often lack(s) supporting empirical evidence that goes beyond unsubstantiated and anecdotal "best practice" case studies'. Somehow this rings very true for me. Reading high-level publications from international agencies<sup>5,6</sup> along with the review in question<sup>2</sup> rather

disturbingly often yields little in the way of hard evidence for the many claims to success that are made. Rutherford<sup>4</sup> also ends by suggesting that 'these "new" proactive approaches merely mask traditional business antagonisms towards ecological issues. This also implies that these may be discourses built up to justify minimal and superficial change.'

Interestingly, Stephan Schmidheiny, the founder and first director of what is now the WBCSD, and who has authored the two publications providing its theoretical underpinnings, turns out to have been the Swiss owner of Eternit.

This multinational asbestos cement company was integrally bound up with the twin global environmental and occupational health disasters of asbestos-related diseases. Here in South Africa its subsidiary Everite for years mined blue asbestos and manufactured asbestos cement. The company kept a very detailed database of medical surveillance data for exposed workers which went unanalysed for many years. When labour pressure eventually resulted in the release of this database to me for analysis, the quality of the data was so poor as to render the database (and all the effort that had gone into medical surveillance over those years) useless – although quite a bit of money must have been spent obtaining these data. For instance, lung function values grew and radiographic evidence of pneumoconiosis resolved with time! Nevertheless a steady stream of asbestosis and mesothelioma cases was (and is still being) produced. The asbestos industry caused one of the great environmental disasters of our time by rendering vast tracts of the Northern Cape perpetually hazardous for the risk of mesothelioma. Globally the biggest-ever occupational asbestos-related cancer epidemic is still raging today.

Schmidheiny sold out of asbestos at just the right time and has gone on to sell sustainable development WBCSD style. Rutherford<sup>4</sup> has described him as the leader in the green business movement in a citation. One can't help wondering whether this is a new chapter in the involvement of business with environmental matters, or whether as suggested by Rutherford the work of the WBCSD may rather involve 'discourses built up to justify minimal and superficial change' on the global occupational and environmental front.

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3. Smith CA, Shannon HS. How much science is there in injury prevention control? *Injury Prevention* 2003; 9: 89-90.
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5. *HIV/AIDS and Work in a Globalizing World*. Geneva: International Labour Organisation, 2005.
6. *HIV/AIDS and Work: Global Estimates, Impact and Response*. Geneva: International Labour Organisation, 2005.