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## Asbestos little-understood issue in real estate industry

Emma and Henry (not their real names) live in a modest three-bedroom detached home near Bathurst and Lawrence. A few weeks ago, their laundry room experienced a minor sewage backup caused by a cracked sewage pipe under the front lawn.

After the pipe was replaced, the couple became concerned about mould beneath the flooring tiles in the laundry room. They called in their insurance company, and it wasn't long before the vinyl tiles were being ripped up only to reveal a layer of asbestos tiles underneath.

For a half century, until the mid 1980s, asbestos was widely used in many household products, including millions of flooring tiles such as the ones found in Emma and Henry's house.

In the 1980s, it was discovered that inhaling asbestos fibres can cause lung cancer, and its use in domestic and industrial products began to decline rapidly.

The insurance adjusters decided that it was necessary to remove all three layers of floor tiles which had been glued on top of the original concrete floor (with an adhesive containing asbestos).

A crew hired by the insurer proceeded to remove the tiles with power tools. The insurer's environmental team then reported that the house contained a dangerous level of asbestos dust (having been disturbed by the power tools), and the owners had to leave immediately with only the clothes they were wearing.

After asbestos was discovered in the air ducts, the insurance company and environmental team told Emma and Henry that all the air ducts had to be removed from behind the walls, ceilings and floors in order to remediate the property, and that the insurance company was considering cancelling their policy.

By this time, the couple and their 3-year old son had been living with Henry's parents for almost three weeks. They began to panic as they faced the possibility that the house required a level three remediation, and might have to be torn down. They were facing a potential loss of \$250,000 in equity and concerned about the health of their allergic son and unborn child.

Emma's father phoned me in a panic and explained the problem.

At my suggestion, they called in Don Pinchin, the founder of Pinchin Environmental, one of the oldest and largest Canadian environmental consultants ([www.pinchin.com](http://www.pinchin.com)). In the industry, Pinchin himself is known as the godfather of environmental consultants, although he rarely performs site visits anymore.

In light of the bizarre circumstances, however, Pinchin agreed to come to the house. It wasn't long before he was crawling around the basement on his hands and knees, looking for asbestos with his specialized tool kit.

In short order, Pinchin discovered some asbestos paper wrapping the vents at the end of the air ducts, and, after testing the air, not much else. The paper was encapsulated and removed at a nominal cost of about \$1,000.

Pinchin produced a 55-page report confirming that the house had no more airborne asbestos than what might be found in ordinary outdoor air.

He told Emma and Henry to move back in, and that the house was completely safe as far as I'm concerned. Henry later told me that Don Pinchin was my knight in shining armour.

Henry is a real estate agent with a university degree. He is concerned that no current provincial real estate association form deals with the little-understood issue of asbestos. He challenged the real estate industry to put the issue on the table and figure out what we're going to do about it.

We need to educate the public as to how asbestos affects consumers, he told me.

Henry was also critical of his insurance company for threatening to cancel his coverage and sending in an incompetent removal team who only made matters worse.

To anyone finding asbestos in a house, Henry recommends leaving the removal to competent professionals and never to disturb it with power tools.

For more information on asbestos in the home, I recommend the CMHC website at <http://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/>. Type asbestos in the search box.

Or go directly to [http://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/en/co/maho/yohoyohe/inaiqu/inaiqu\\_001.cfm](http://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/en/co/maho/yohoyohe/inaiqu/inaiqu_001.cfm) or <http://www.cmhc-schl.gc.ca/odpub/pdf/62029.pdf?lang=en> or Health Canada's site at [http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/cps-spc/house-domes/decor/construct\\_asbestos-amiante-eng.php](http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/cps-spc/house-domes/decor/construct_asbestos-amiante-eng.php) .

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