

# AMIANTO — ITALIA — CANADA — ASBESTOS

## Honouring the victims of asbestos exposure in Italy and Canada.

### Background on the Casale Monferrato visit to Ontario: April 7 – 15, 2019

Casale Monferrato is a small city near Torino known around the world as an epicentre of asbestos disease. Over the course several decades the city, devastated by the hazardous exposure and a staggeringly high level of the associated industrial disease, came together in a true tale of survival. They have learned to turn the page towards a better future. Our province has much to learn from their journey, which is the rationale behind the delegation's visit. The focus during the exchange will be educational, as we in Canada are only beginning this process, given our government has only implemented the ban on asbestos this year. There is much that we can learn from their experience of dealing with the complex legacy of asbestos. The delegation will be hosted by our Villa Charities, the Amianto-Italia-Canada-Asbestos Committee, (affiliated with the Italian Fallen Workers Memorial Committee), Comitès (a major Italian community organization), Asbestos Free Canada, and other organizations who are stakeholders in the fight against industrial disease.

Many people in Ontario are familiar with the history of Italian-Canadian workers. For a full century, 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, with most of them finding the "better life" they sought, but thousands paid the ultimate price and lost their lives at work. *The Italian Fallen Workers Memorial Wall* is a testament to just how significant these losses were — over 2000 of them, and counting. Many of these deaths occurred because of workplace incidents which led to immediate death, but there is an additional story to be told. It involves exposure to asbestos.

This miracle substance was extensively industrially processed wherever Italians immigrated — Belgium, France, Australia, Argentina, the United States **and Canada**. Wherever Italians went, asbestos was waiting for them. As new immigrant workers, they were especially vulnerable and often ended up in industries where asbestos was encountered daily. Back home, asbestos was being processed all over Italy. By far the worst hit was Casale Monferrato, a small city of 36,000 people east of Torino. *Eternit*, a large asbestos cement factory operated there for over 80 years, closing finally in 1986. Exposure 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 years since the factory closed, there are still 50 new cases of mesothelioma annually and over 1400 related cases of 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, around 150 Ontarians are dying annually from mesothelioma and another 425 from lung cancer, many of these Italian-Canadians. Especially hard hit are the communities of 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 galvanized on a grass roots community level and on a professional medical level, gaining significant expertise in dealing with the affects of asbestos exposure. They are eager to share their experience, especially with the Italian-Canadian community who suffered a similar fate. 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** — Given the crushing number of mesothelioma cases in the small city, health professionals of Casale Monferrato have had to develop an integrated approach involving frontline physicians, psychological support and poignantly, an end of life hospice offering peaceful last days.

The delegation is eager to share their experience and to learn about the important innovations in treatment being achieved in the Canadian health centres specializing in mesothelioma treatment.

- **Educational Programs** — 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 about asbestos exposure.
- **Urban Environmental Elimination** — At the civic level, elected officials have dedicated the past quarter century to cleaning up the asbestos in Casale, an admirable but difficult process, yet one that has met with significant success. We face the same challenge in Canada in our future.
- **Community Activism** — The small community of Casale Monferrato galvanized to spearhead initiatives in Italy to ban asbestos and deal with its complex legacy within the built environment.
- **Future Transitions** — 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, a UNESCO World Heritage site.

## THE DELEGATION FROM CASALE MONFERRATO

- **City Council Member, Assunta Prato** (also retired teacher noted below) will meet with Ontario community leaders, civic and elected officials 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.
- **Medical Oncologists Dr. Daniela DeGiovanni and Dr. Federica Grosso** who have led the development of the integrated treatment and palliative care for mesothelioma patients, and the psychological and social support for them and their families. They will participate in joint educational sessions with Canadian health professionals, to exchange innovations in mesothelioma treatment with the Mesothelioma Program at the University Health Centre. **Daniela** founded VITAS, a network of support including a hospice and was appointed by Italy's President Mattarella to the Order of Merit of the Republic in 2018. **Federica** is the Director of the Joint Mesothelioma Program for the Alessandria and Casale Monferrato hospitals. **Both are also** major participants in a Canadian-led immunotherapy clinical trial.
- **Retired teacher Assunta Prato (who lost her husband to mesothelioma) and student Camilla Ferro (very active in asbestos education in her high school)**, will present to Ontario educators and students 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 industrial exposure.
- **Labour leaders Bruno Pesce and Nicola Pondrano**, leaders of the asbestos victims' group of Casale Monferrato will present to and learn from Ontario victims, families and activists to prevent future hazardous exposures, protect victims and further awareness.

## DELEGATION SCHEDULE

The delegation will arrive on Sunday, April 7, 2019 and depart Monday, April 15, 2019. Visits to Toronto (April 12–13), Peterborough (April 8) and Sarnia (April 9–10) will complete the program. In each city, the delegation will be presenting on the issues outlined above. During the Toronto segment of the visit, a gathering on Saturday, April 13 of representatives from the main occupational disease clusters in Ontario, will share both the experiences in Italy and in Canada and focus on 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 Canada.

For more information on this conference, please contact [info@ItalianFallenWorkersMemorial.com](mailto:info@ItalianFallenWorkersMemorial.com).

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The event has been graciously sponsored by the Canadian Mesothelioma Foundation, the Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers, Villa Charities, Unifor, Canada's Building Trades Unions, the Provincial Building and Construction Trades Council of Ontario, the Labourers' International Union and the United Steelworkers' Union (District 6).