



# Dealing with the delay

## The effort to prevent workplace cancer

It is well established that many substances used in workplaces can cause cancer. It's no surprise that the worst culprits, like asbestos and silica, get the most attention because they are so deadly. However, there are other causes of cancer that tend to be overlooked, like the sun for example.

It's obviously an important task to raise awareness and adopt practices to prevent workplace cancer. The problem in doing so is the delay before the long-term health effects appear.

Paul Demers is the Director of the Occupational Cancer Research Centre, which is in partnership with Cancer Care Ontario. His research is helping find new ways to prevent cancer in the workplace.

"We know a lot about cancer in the construction industry—it's less a matter of discovery than of trying to see how we're doing in terms of controlling and monitoring what the risks of cancer are, using some of the data systems that we've set up," Demers explained.

"We'd like to be doing more work on promoting prevention and increasing awareness."

Unfortunately, there is an obstacle for researchers who study long-term health issues. And that is the delay between the workplace exposure and the fatal consequences that arrive later.

"We started reducing exposures and limiting the use of asbestos in the mid-1970s, and here we are with the rates of mesothelioma continuing to go up every year. At this point, we don't have evidence that those rates have even peaked yet," said Demers.

Because people are exposed to such a wide variety of chemicals and dusts or fibres in the places where they work, they may be in danger from more than one kind of cancer. What most people don't realize, however, is that when they work with hazardous materials, cancer is just one way that their health can be damaged.

"These are toxic substances, and many of the ones that cause lung cancer also cause lung damage and have other health impacts associated with them," said Demers. "I don't feel like there's anything that only causes cancer—there could be a multitude of effects."

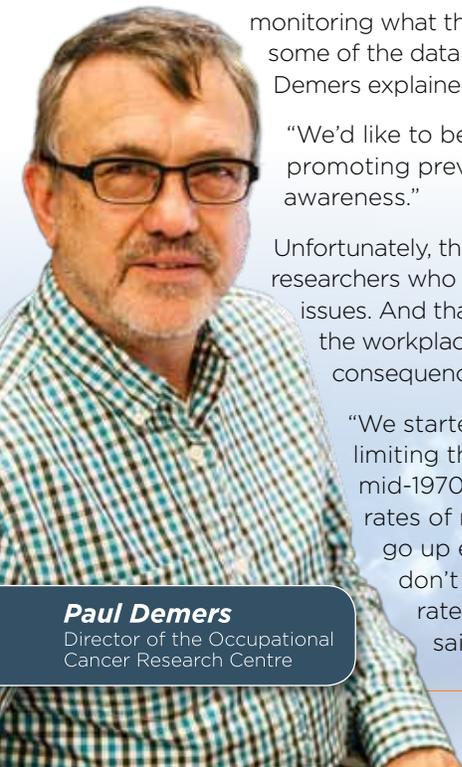
An example is silica, a material found in a variety of construction materials such as asphalt, brick, cement, concrete, drywall, grout, mortar, stone, sand, terrazzo, and tile. Breathing in silica dust from cutting, drilling, and grinding these building materials has been known to cause cancer. However, silica can also cause other diseases such as silicosis, scleroderma, tuberculosis, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD).

When an employer is assessing hazards in the workplace, there's a tendency to pay attention to the immediate dangers and eliminate hazards that could do serious physical harm to workers right now. But in the effort to prevent workplace cancer, that same sense of urgency also needs to be applied to exposure that is known to cause as much harm (if not more) after many years.

To eliminate the delay factor, we need to take cancer-causing hazards as seriously as electrocution or falls from heights.

"The message at the end of the day is that we can prevent cancer. It's not that it's inevitable, it's that we can prevent it—we just need to make it a priority."

For more information, visit the OCRC website at: [occupationalcancer.ca](http://occupationalcancer.ca)



**Paul Demers**  
Director of the Occupational Cancer Research Centre