



# THE ONTARIO COLLEGE OF FAMILY PHYSICIANS

A CHAPTER OF THE COLLEGE OF FAMILY PHYSICIANS OF CANADA

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21 February 2008

The Honourable Margaret Best  
Minister of Health Promotions  
77 Bay Street, 18<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Toronto ON M7A 1S5

Dear Minister Best:

## **Re: Proposed Uranium Exploration/Mining in Sharbot Lake, Ontario**

The Environmental Health Committee of the Ontario College of Family Physicians has been receiving communications of concern from physicians in Eastern Ontario and beyond about proposed exploration and potential uranium mining in four areas: Gatineau in Quebec, Bancroft/Haliburton, Elliot Lake, and, particularly, Sharbot Lake in Ontario.

Physicians are clinically autonomous, community-based healthcare providers, who have an ethical obligation to speak up when they are concerned about issues that may adversely affect the health and well-being of their patients and communities.

The members of the Environmental Health Committee (EHC) are physicians who, on a volunteer basis or assisted by universities, government departments, and non-profit foundations, research and educate about the known or potential links between health outcomes and environmental exposures in air, food, water, soil and consumer products.

It is the practice of the EHC to carefully examine the available evidence around environmental health issues in order to make informed decisions regarding comments, recommendations, or actions.

Physicians in communities near to the Sharbot Lake site have expressed urgency with respect to their concerns because they believe that exploration drilling is about to be prematurely permitted without adequate assessment of the potential health and environmental impacts on their constituencies. The EHC respects our physician colleagues for raising the concerns summarized in the Appendix, and will continue to seek further information that might help to clarify the risks and benefits associated with uranium exploration and mining.

It would seem prudent for all relevant government departments, federal, provincial, and municipal, to continue to do the same. We think that coordination and publication of the findings from various government departments, with opportunity for public consultation,

will be key to involvement of the public in decisions that could potentially have impact for generations to come.

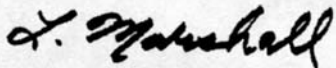
Your government has already made considerable headway in improving protection for the citizens of Ontario from many different known or potential environmental health hazards with your proposed province-wide pesticide ban and toxics use reduction legislation.

We would appreciate your response to us regarding the concerns raised by our colleague physicians in the Sharbot Lake area, with a fully transparent health impact assessment before any exploration drilling for uranium commences.

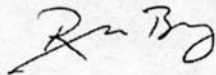
Thank you for your swift attention.

Yours truly,

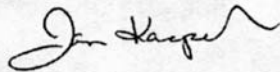
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M. Janet Kasperski RN, MHSc, CHE  
Chief Executive Officer, Ontario College of Family Physicians



Renee Arnold MD, CCFP, FCFP  
President, Ontario College of Family Physicians



cc: Premier Dalton McGuinty

## Appendix

### Summary of Concerns Expressed by Physician Colleagues to the Ontario College of Family Physicians Environmental Health Committee (EHC) About Proposed Sharbot Lake Uranium Exploration/Mining

*Note: EHC comments or references are italicized in parentheses*

- ❖ Radiation from uranium and its decay products, including radium and radon, is known to increase lung cancer risk in uranium miners. *(Studies have revealed that the risk was further enhanced by smoking, and data from five mining cohorts, reported by the U.S. National Academy of Sciences in 1988 indicated that the highest risk for lung cancer in miners occurs from 5 to 15 years following exposure [Casaret and Doull's Toxicology, 1991:740-743]. Long latency periods, and multiple concurrent exposures to carcinogens make direct exposure-effect associations challenging and expensive to study.)*
- ❖ Evidence in both animals and humans has suggested that exposure to ionizing radiation early in life may enhance the probability of developing cancer from a given exposure, and developing it earlier, either in childhood or early adulthood. *(This is supported by references in Toronto Public Health. Environmental Threats to Children- Understanding the Risks, Enabling Prevention, September, 2005:69-70- exposures to radiation in utero or soon after birth may be the most important in determining cancer risks in children. )*
- ❖ The dose below which there is no observed adverse effect of uranium or decay products is unknown. *(This has been noted for a number of toxicants, particularly for vulnerable populations such as pregnant women, fetuses, and young children who are rapidly developing [Canadian Partnership for Children's Health and the environment- A Primer, August 2005:25].)*
- ❖ Disturbance of uranium-containing rock by drilling may allow introduction of radioactive substances into aquifers, which could lead to contamination of nearby community residents' well water, or of lakes and rivers, potentially adversely affecting aquatic life and municipal water supplies of nearby communities.
- ❖ No water testing program is planned should drilling proceed, nor compensable solutions suggested should wells become contaminated.
- ❖ Citizens in the Sharbot Lake region have been informed that the Mining Act of Ontario takes precedence over property owners' rights or protective provincial environmental legislation, including the Clean Water Act.
- ❖ The ownership of Crown land staked for exploration is disputed by two Algonquin First Nations groups, Ardoch and Shabot Obaadjewaan, and they fear irreversible contamination of what they perceive as their land.
- ❖ Should uranium mining be instituted, the mine tailings will pose an environmental problem with long term implications for the surrounding eco-system and communities *(A doctoral student at the University of Toronto, conducting research on health and environmental impacts of uranium mining, has indicated that the mine waste, the tailings, gives off radon gas, and other decay products of*

*uranium in radioactive dust, which have varying half lives, but which can continue through many human generations.)*

- ❖ Safe transportation of radioactive material will be another issue of importance to be dealt with.
- ❖ The Sharbot Lake site is in a populated area of Eastern Ontario. Eleven municipal governments, including Perth, Carleton Place, and the city of Kingston, have passed resolutions petitioning the provincial government for a moratorium on uranium mining and exploration in Eastern Ontario. Ottawa will consider taking the same action very soon.
- ❖ Jurisdictional responsibility has been extremely difficult for concerned citizens to determine, with overlap in several ministries of both federal and provincial governments, and often conflicting responses to enquiries being given. Confusion and inaction has ensued.