Editorial

Radon: Time to do something about it!

What do we need to know about radon, a naturally occurring gas that we now know is dangerous when it gets in our homes? First of all, let’s not panic. On an individual basis, it’s not impossible to calmly tackle the problem, as suggested in “Do you have radon in your home?” on page 40. On a collective basis, we have to master this uninvited guest by taking immediate action!

We all have our homework cut out for us as homeowners, but to “motivate” us more, perhaps we could introduce a permanent feature to the present income-tax credit system regarding home renovations.

The Quebec Lung Association has been warning us about it for years: radon is the second cause of lung cancer after cigarettes for people who are exposed, even in small doses. The Canadian government did not revise the acceptable level of concentration until 2007, and then only lowering it from 800 to 200 becquerels per cubic metre. Is that enough, when the US has pegged it at 150 becquerels? That remains to be seen, but in the meantime, Canada needs to get busy finding solutions. While it is crucial we foster awareness and inform the public properly, we must also reassure them by providing adequate tools.

Granted, since the first step consists of detecting the presence of radon in the home, there aren’t many ways to do it that are easily accessible. As more and more people learn about radon, we may expect to see some tools appear on the market. But we have yet to make sure the public is informed and that all future detection devices meet standards to guarantee they work efficiently.

Obviously, in situations where levels exceed the standard, the next step is to do something about it. For that we’ll need reliable experts. But there’s no “radon school” in Quebec as yet. They have them in the US, but what works there may not necessarily work here, due to differences in climate, construction standards, soil and so forth. We can’t just “copy and paste” what our neighbours to the south do. We have to develop our own expertise. Reliable and more accessible tests, defining an intervention procedure – doesn’t that put us in the broader context of public health? The question is so crucial at this point that it has produced the Comité Intersectoriel Québécois sur le Radon, which is responsible for coordinating all aspects of the problem. Also involved are the ministère de la Santé et des Services Sociaux du Québec and Health Canada, as well as several other ministries and organizations directly concerned.

We all have our homework cut out for us as homeowners, but to “motivate” us more, perhaps a permanent feature to the present income-tax credit system regarding home renovations could be introduced. And, in tandem to that, we need to reinforce prevention by integrating the radon question as quickly as possible into construction standards.

The problem is vast and complex. But at least we’re beginning to talk about it, and we ought to be seeing solutions soon. At least, let’s hope so!

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