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THE SLEEPING GIANT

THE NUMBER OF MESOTHELIOMA SUFFERERS IS GROWING AND DIAGNOSED CASES ARE NO LONGER LIMITED TO INDUSTRIAL WORKERS.

Asbestos has been the main cause of occupational ill health since around 1950. It is still the single greatest work-related cause of death, and the British Lung Foundation reports that currently more than 2,000 people are diagnosed with mesothelioma every year in the UK. According to HSE figures, about 4,000 people are now dying from asbestos-related cancers every year.

Despite the use of asbestos being banned in the UK in 1999, previous exposure to asbestos means incidence rates have not yet reached their maximum, and they are expected to peak over the next ten years.

Mesothelioma is a form of cancer of the mesothelium, a protective lining that covers most of the body's internal organs, and which particularly affects the outer lining of the lungs and chest cavity. The cancer has been connected with exposure to asbestos. Symptoms may not appear until 20 to 50 years after exposure to asbestos, and it is nearly always fatal.

AN "EXTRAORDINARY" ERROR

Up to 90,000 people will die in the UK from mesothelioma following exposure to asbestos and a further 90,000 from other asbestos-related lung diseases, according to Professor Julian Peto, the chairman of Cancer Research UK and a Professor of Epidemiology at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. He has called the use of asbestos in Britain "an extraordinary industrial error".

Carpenters who used a particular type of wood in their work, shipyard workers, metal workers and electricians are all in danger, with those born between 1945 and 1950 being particularly at risk. Peto says an "epidemic" of mesothelioma and asbestos-related lung cancer will peak in less than 10 years. He adds: "Mesothelioma is on a completely different scale from any other industrial cancer disease in the world. The highest-risk group of all is carpenters. One in 10 of all carpenters in Britain born in the 1940s could be affected."

SECOND-HAND EXPOSURE

There is significant evidence that women and children who lived with men exposed to asbestos in the 1960s

also ran a risk of exposure to asbestos fibres and so had a chance of contracting the disease. Recent media coverage has seen many cases taken to court, sometimes with conflicting outcomes.

In February 2007, we reported on the case of a widow of a 32-year-old man, Barry Welch, who contracted mesothelioma after inhaling asbestos on his stepfather's work clothing as a child. He was believed to be the youngest person to have died from the asbestos-related cancer. His widow succeeded in her legal battle for compensation, and the level of damages is to be decided at a separate hearing shortly.

More recently, the daughter of a dockyard worker has been diagnosed with mesothelioma, which she believes she contracted as a child by hugging her father when he came home from work. Debra Brewer's father worked as a lagger at the local dockyard for five years, where he was exposed to asbestos on a daily basis. Ms Brewer remembers that he would always arrive home from work covered in dust and she recalls the difficulty her mother had in washing the dust from her father's clothes. Her father passed away from an asbestos-related industrial disease and an inquest in August 2006 confirmed the finding. Ms Brewer has since engaged lawyers to prove her case.

Earlier this year we also reported on the case of James McGuire, whose widow contracted mesothelioma through second-hand exposure to asbestos through his work clothes. His wife was awarded £82,000, but died just weeks after the High Court ruling. Mr McGuire was stripped of the payout a year later by the Court of Appeal, which stated that, given the state of knowledge about the risks of secondary exposure to asbestos, the ship repair yard in Liverpool that employed him could not have reasonably foreseen that his wife would have suffered personal injury.

ACTION MESOTHELIOMA DAY

Tuesday, 27 February 2007 saw events taking place across the country to mark the 2007 Action Mesothelioma Day, including a parliamentary reception at the

House of Commons, hosted by Michael Clapham (Lab) MP and organised by the British Lung Foundation.

One of the people lending support to the awareness day was David Littlemore, who lost his wife Margaret to the disease. 54-year-old Margaret Littlemore died in July 2005 after being diagnosed with mesothelioma. She was unwittingly exposed to the deadly asbestos dust while working at the former Plessey Factory on North Hylton Road, where she made telephone exchange relay switches, during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Mr Littlemore says: "People must realise how painful and devastating this disease is. More people die of asbestos-related diseases than in road traffic accidents, and anything that can be done to ensure that people are not exposed to asbestos must be done to prevent more people suffering from asbestos-related diseases, such as mesothelioma."

A GROWING CONCERN

Lucy Hindmarch, a solicitor from Newcastle-based law firm Irwin Mitchell, which has acted on behalf of hundreds of victims of the disease, says: "Mrs Littlemore's case is sadly becoming more and more familiar. We have seen a year-on-year increase in the number of people developing mesothelioma. Of great concern is the growing number of people, not usually associated with heavy exposure to asbestos, who have been diagnosed with mesothelioma. These include teachers, hospital staff and family members."

Another sufferer has called for there to be a greater awareness among the public of the dangers related to the exposure to asbestos. Ann Weaver, 74, started work as a primary school teacher in 1951. However, it was not until 1979, when Mrs Weaver had moved to Norfolk, that it is alleged she was exposed to asbestos at Aslacton Primary School, Norwich.

Mrs Weaver says: "I taught at Aslacton School until 1989. For the last four years before I retired I taught from an old mobile classroom, which was suspected of being made of asbestos, as many mobile classrooms were. As many teachers do, I was always pinning up the children's work on to the walls

THE REGULATIONS

November 2006 saw the introduction of The Control of Asbestos Regulations, which set out new, more stringent control limits for asbestos. The Regulations bring together the three previous sets of Regulations covering the prohibition of asbestos, the control of asbestos at work and asbestos licensing.

The Regulations prohibit the importation, supply and use of all forms of asbestos. They continue the ban introduced for blue and brown asbestos in 1985 and for white asbestos in 1999. They also continue the ban of second-hand use of asbestos products, such as asbestos cement sheets and asbestos boards and tiles, including panels that have been covered with paint or textured plaster containing asbestos.

The ban applies to new uses of asbestos. If existing materials that contain asbestos are in good condition, they may be left in place and their condition monitored and managed to ensure they are not disturbed. The Regulations also include the 'duty to manage asbestos' in non-domestic premises, which requires mandatory training for anyone liable to be exposed to asbestos fibres at work. Respiratory protective equipment is an important part of the control regime but it must not be the sole measure used to reduce exposure and should only be used to supplement other measures.

of the classroom and this could very easily have released the asbestos fibres which led to this terrible disease."

Mrs Weaver wants people to be aware that many people are at risk from asbestos exposure, not just those who worked in heavy industry and construction. "The use of asbestos in schools was a tragic mistake; I want to do all I can to alert people to the dangers of asbestos," she adds.

As these cases illustrate, the victims are not just those directly exposed to asbestos. "Historically it is incomprehensible that this has happened," says Professor Peto. "That Britain should have made this extraordinary industrial error seems hard to understand." Although Professor Peto explains that the dangers of exposure to asbestos have been known since the 1930s, few safeguards were enacted for decades.

Prevention is always better than cure, but it seems too late for this sleeping giant.