

The Human Cost of Asbestos Disease

*Robert Vojakovic AM JP, B.Com., President of the Asbestos Diseases Society of Australia Inc
Osasco Brazil September 2000*

3.4 ASBESTOS DISEASES SOCIETY OF AUSTRALIA

(Ed. Some of the colour pictures in this presentation show sharpest definitions at 200-300% magnifications; the monochrome images are best viewed at 150% or less.)

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Introduction

It was well said by Dr E R A Mereweather in 1936 when asked whether two years of asbestos exposure could precipitate asbestosis in a young girl, he replied: “Yes, if she lives long enough.”¹ Despite this occupational disease pioneer’s great prediction of the fate of asbestos workers, asbestos industry carried on business as usual well into the 70’s in developed countries.

Currently there is an epidemic of asbestos diseases reaching every continent, caused by mining, manufacturing and the indiscriminate use of asbestos over the last fifty years. Many victims of asbestos diseases have pursued compensation/damages claims against those responsible for their predicament. However, compensation/damages are only one of many costs such as social, health, loss of life etc. These costs were not included in the price of asbestos; thus the asbestos industry was able to maintain a competitive edge in the market place over safe alternative products.

To date most of the social, health and human costs associated with asbestos caused disease have been borne by the community at large rather than Industry and its shareholders. It can be said that the predominant beneficiaries from the mining, manufacturing and use of asbestos have been large multi national corporations. In contrast the losers all over the world are the thousands of asbestos disease victims, their families and other manufacturers who could have provided the community with safe alternative non-carcinogenic products.

The lessons of the asbestos experience, the long tragic chain of adverse medical, legal and social consequences have reinforced the well-recognised principle that the employer, the producer of asbestos products has always had the inherent responsibility not to endanger the workers or communities.



Infamous Wittenoom Mine and Mill

This responsibility, when ignored or covered up by management as evidenced within the asbestos industry, has brought about an irreversible legacy of human tragedies in the succeeding decades.

1. Demy, N.G. and Adler, Howard, Asbestosis and Malignancy, Am. J. of Roent., 100:597 (July, 1967)

It is not possible to put a price on human, social and health costs related to asbestos caused diseases. Nevertheless, I will attempt to describe the human costs associated with blue asbestos mining at Wittenoom, Western Australia, which in fact is Australia's greatest industrial human tragedy. My comments for this paper are drawn from my personal experience as a former Wittenoom blue asbestos miner and from my work at the Asbestos Diseases Society of Australia Inc. (ADSA) and the Asbestos Diseases Advisory Services (ADAS) over the past twenty-one years, assisting asbestos disease victims and their families.

Wittenoom

CSR's blue asbestos mine at Wittenoom, Western Australia, is a tragic story of an asbestos polluted community of more than 20,000 men and women plus 5-6,000 children.

Wittenoom is considered Australia's best example of a modern industrial disaster, comparable to similar catastrophes such as Bopal, Seveso and Minamata. Western Australia has a higher rate of malignant mesothelioma per capita of population when compared with the mortality statistics available for other communities in the world.

Exposure to Wittenoom blue asbestos dust has impacted on the health of all Australians and in particular Western Australians. Victims include the Wittenoom Mine and Mill workforce, their families, dockworkers, seamen, rail workers, road transport workers, manufacturing workers and tradesmen using asbestos products, etc.



**BLUE ASBESTOS BAGGING STATION AT
WITTENOOM**

Historical Background

During the mid 1930's Lang Hancock discovered deposits of blue and white asbestos at Wittenoom located in the northwest region of Western Australia. Several years later Hancock was made aware of the market potential for blue asbestos overseas.

He commenced mining drawing his work force from the Australian Indigenous Peoples (or Aboriginal Australians) living in the region, including women. His mining techniques consisted of open cut blasting and hand cobbing the host rocks to extract blue asbestos fibre. Fibre was hand picked and packed into hessian bags (usually by the elderly and very young Aboriginal Australians) and transported to Cosak or Point Samson for overseas and domestic consumption.

According to the surviving Aboriginal blue asbestos miners, they received no wages other than tucker² (food) and tobacco for their labour. Later Hancock installed a primitive plant to replace the need for hand cobbing. Instead the rock was crushed by machinery to expose the fibre. However, the procedure of hand picking and packing into hessian bags continued.



In 1943 Hancock sold his blue asbestos mine and tenement to CSR who retained him as operations manager for the next five years. Under CSR's ownership through their fully owned subsidiary Australian Blue Asbestos (ABA) Pty. Ltd., the mine and mill expanded operations requiring additional labour.

Although there was a post war shortage of labour CSR took advantage of political connections to recruit migrant labour locally and internationally. The majority of migrants came from post war Italy, Poland, Germany, Czechoslovakia, former Yugoslavia, Holland, Greece, Russia and the United Kingdom. Migrant ships berthing at Fremantle Harbour (Western Australia) would be met by ABA buses waiting to recruit "mine fodder" alighting from ships.

² Tucker – Australian Slang expression for food.

CSR/ABA received numerous warnings as to excessive asbestos fibre levels at Wittenoom mining operations as early as 1948 by Emeritus Professor Eric Saint. For example he wrote to the Department of Health in Perth expressing the famous quote,



Busy bagging station at Wittenoom Mill

"Moreover, I've an eye on the future of the asbestos mill at Wittenoom, which at the second operates without any sort of dust extractor whatsoever;.... in a year or two ABA [Australian Blue Asbestos] will produce the richest and most lethal crop of asbestosis in the world's literature."

Additional warnings came from Dr Jim McNulty who later became the Commissioner for Health in Western Australia, Dr Don Letham - The Father of Occupational Health Medicine in Western Australia, H. Maynard Rennie – CSR Chief Medical Consultant, and an unspecified number of hygienists, mining inspectors and mining engineers. Notwithstanding all those warnings CSR/ABA continued to run the Wittenoom blue asbestos mine and mill below the required standards of the day unabated for twenty-three years.

In December 1966 CSR closed its Wittenoom blue asbestos mining operations claiming "falling demand" and prices for blue asbestos fibre had made the operations uneconomical. Thus, the era of blue asbestos mining at Wittenoom came to an end but the avalanche of asbestos diseases was about to emerge amongst the former miners and residents.



Wittenoom mine workers and residents participate in a competition shoveling blue asbestos tailings in to oil drums as one of the activities on Race Day a highlight in the Wittenoom social calendar.

Table 1**Employment – Wittenoom CSR Blue Asbestos Mining & Milling**

Area of Employment	Number of Employees
Wittenoom Mine (old mine)	552
Wittenoom Mill (old mill)	906
Colonial Mine (new mine)	1973
Colonial Mill (new mill)	1508
Surface Workers	671
Old Power House	5
Office Staff (Females)	63
Office Staff (Males)	49
Bag Factory (Females)	15
Staff Quarters (Females)	25
Market Garden (Females)	1
Township (Females)	313
Township (Males)	430
Roebourne Carriers	5
Non-Recorded Workers	410
TOTAL	6950

Source: The Asbestos Diseases Society of Australia Inc

Asbestos Diseases

The first cases of asbestos caused diseases amongst the Wittenoom workforce began to appear towards the end of the 1940's. A steady flow of mesothelioma, lung cancer, asbestosis and pleural diseases continued to manifest themselves amongst former Wittenoom mine and mill workers and their families (see table 2). The first recorded case of mesothelioma from Wittenoom occurred around 1961. This was the first confirmation of mesothelioma in Australia (incubation period 11 years).

A steady trend of asbestos caused diseases became to emerge amongst former Wittenoom miners and their families after the closure of the Mine and Mill.

Table 2

Disease Name	Number of Males	Number of Females
Mesothelioma	301	19
Lung Cancer	296	14
Asbestosis	611	12
Pleural Disease	930	47
TOTAL	2138	92

Source: Asbestos Diseases Society of Australia Inc.

Transport

The cartage of hessian³ bags containing the blue asbestos fibre from Wittenoom to Roebourne and onto Point Samson was carried out by independent contractors, which mainly employed Aboriginal labour. Thus far, it is known that more than forty-eight cartage personnel have developed one of the following asbestos related diseases, mesothelioma, lung cancer or asbestosis.

It is believed that more than 6000 Aboriginal Australians had some exposure to blue asbestos in the Pilbara Region. However, it was not until the ADAS investigated the matter in 1984 that Aboriginal labour was included into any statistics associated with Wittenoom blue asbestos. ADAS and legal firm Slater & Gordon made it possible for many Aboriginal Australians disabled from asbestos related diseases to be compensated.

The ships in the Port of Point Samson were loaded with hessian bags filled with blue asbestos for domestic and worldwide distribution. The labour employed at Point Samson was under the jurisdiction of the Department of Harbour and Lights (Western Australian Government Department). Due to the scarcity of manual labour on the wharf it was not uncommon to observe Aboriginal Australian labour (some times as young as 12 - 14 years of age) loading the ships.

The complete statistics of former Point Samson "lumpers" are very difficult to compile owing to the casual nature of their employment. However, ADAS statistics suggest there are more than 60 persons who have died from asbestos caused diseases in this work category.

Most of the Wittenoom blue asbestos was shipped to the Port of Fremantle by State Ships where it was offloaded by Port labour. To meet the demand of the asbestos product manufacturers, asbestos was also shipped from overseas to Fremantle.

As all asbestos cargo was handled by the same Port labour there are no separate statistics available to link the asbestos disease to any particular type of fibre exposure,



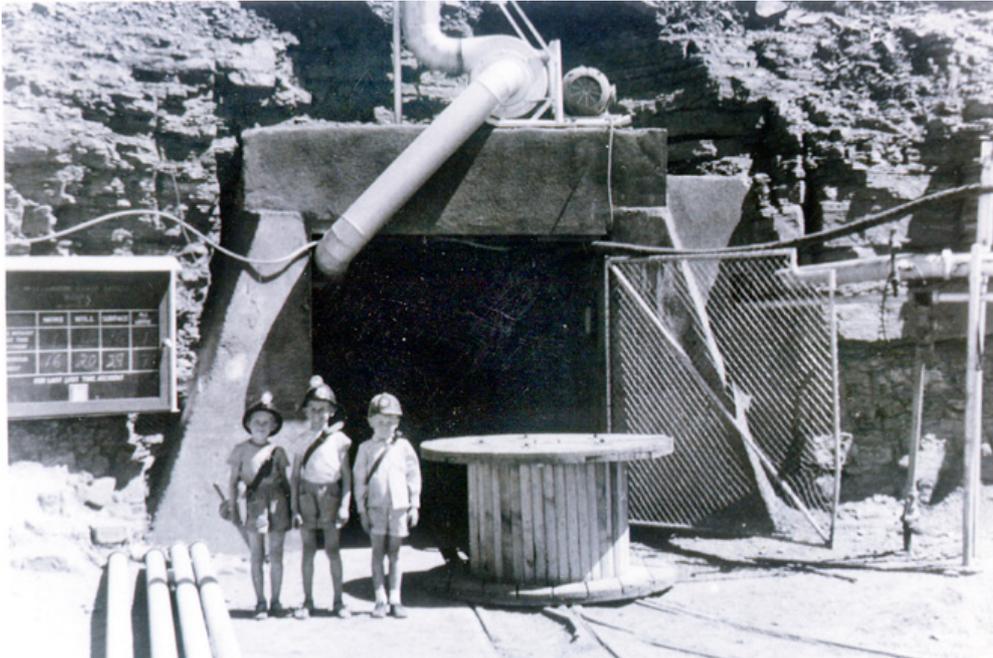
ie Wittenoom or overseas. To date, more than 500 former Fremantle Port workers have developed asbestos caused diseases.

Loading a State Ship at Pt Samson with bagged blue asbestos fibre from the Wittenoom mine – the hold is filled to the top (early 1960's approx)

3. British Asbestos regulations of 1931 banned the transport of blue asbestos in hessian bags and strongly criticised it in 1947 & 1949

Approximate Future Projections of Wittenoom Asbestos Caused Diseases

- (a) 700 mesothelioma
- (b) 425 lung cancer
- (c) 450 asbestosis
- (d) 600 pleural disease
- (e) unknown end products users (made out of Wittenoom asbestos)



Wittenoom children at the entrance of a Blue Asbestos mine (2 have died of Mesothelioma, aged 39 and 41 years)

Conclusion

Wittenoom has left a terrible legacy of pain and misery for people afflicted with asbestos caused cancers. Future projections of diseases are horrifying and they will not peak until well into the 21st Century. By that time it is likely that more than 3500 ex-Wittenoom workers and residents will die.

It is expected that more than one thousand workers will develop malignancies from handling Wittenoom blue asbestos fibre at Point Samson, Roebourne, Port Hedland, Cosak and Fremantle.

The debilitating effects of asbestos caused diseases are not only physical, but also psychological and emotional. The latter can have devastating effects on the victims and their families (spouse & children). It is impossible to put a price on human suffering and death. Human lives should never be measured on a utilitarian scale against the costs of doing business.

When a disease can be preventable it is hard to believe that the evidence of an epidemic of asbestos caused malignancies has been ignored.

Asbestos Diseases Society of Australia Inc.

Towards the end of the 1970's it became apparent that asbestos exposure would create crippling disabilities amongst the workers who had been employed in the asbestos mining, manufacturing and building industries in which asbestos products were used.

Assistance and advice for injured asbestos workers was not available, notwithstanding that abundant evidence of an increasing number of cases of mesothelioma, asbestosis and lung cancer. The victims of asbestos diseases and their families had nowhere to turn to for advice.

It became clear that there was a need for a specialised and professional organisation to deal with all aspects of asbestos diseases and the difficulties it created for victims and their families.

Approximately twenty-one years ago in Perth, Western Australia a group of former Wittenoom asbestos miners decided to establish a non-profit charitable organisation called the Asbestos Diseases Society of Australia Incorporated with the view to pursuing the following broad objectives;

- ◆ To provide counselling and support services to those who develop asbestos related diseases and their families.
- ◆ To provide economic assistance to those who suffer financial hardship or social disadvantages as a result of contracting asbestos-related illness.
- ◆ To increase community awareness of the dangers associated with asbestos and the need for medical research.
- ◆ Fund raising for medical research and support services.
- ◆ To lobby for fair and just compensation and amendments to Limitation Act to facilitate Common Law claims.



**WITTENOOM ASBESTOS MINER
MINING IN STOPE - 38 INCH HEIGHT**

In 1984 the Asbestos Diseases Society was incorporated and created the Asbestos Diseases Advisory Services (ADAS). The ADAS was established in response to an unprecedented demand for independent advice and assistance for asbestos diseases victims, their families and the general community. It provides assistance with;

- ◆ Medico/Legal matters, Workers Compensation/damages.
- ◆ Industrial and environmental hygiene.
- ◆ Collation and distribution of medical and scientific research information on asbestos related issues from worldwide sources.

Both the ADS and ADAS are part of an independent, non-profit, charitable structure and are self-funding and not affiliated with or supported by any commercial interest or otherwise.

Any funds in excess of operating expenses are directed towards asbestos diseases medical research or other charitable objectives based on the needs of the asbestos disease victims and their families.

At present ADAS employs nine full-time staff operating from a Perth suburban building 430 square metres work area. Staff members are extremely busy assisting to more than 7,500 of the Asbestos Diseases Society members in many variety of needs, ie medical legal, Workers' compensation, social security, taxation, public housing, group and one on one counselling including specialised bereavement support.



Wittenoom Blue Asbestos miners in appalling company accommodation