

## ASBESTOS: FROM MAGIC MINERAL TO KILLER DUST

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For over a hundred years, asbestos was highly prized and widely used. The popular nickname of asbestos – the Magic Mineral – reflected the wonder with which the substance was regarded. Its unique chemical composition and physical properties made it suitable for thousands of products from floor tiles to sewage pipes, automotive gaskets, roofing material, sprayed fireproofing and insulation board. Around the world, the commercial exploitation of asbestos became a huge money-spinner.

There was, however, a major problem with the financial success enjoyed by asbestos stakeholders – their profits were obtained at a very high human cost. Wherever asbestos was mined, transported, processed or used, illness and death followed. The first wave of asbestos deaths occurred amongst those who worked in the mining and milling of asbestos fiber and the manufacture of asbestos products. The second wave of disease affected people who used asbestos-containing products such as shipyard insulators and construction workers while the third wave consisted of people exposed to asbestos-containing products in situ, such as schoolteachers, nurses and factory inspectors. Accompanying each phase of the epidemic, were people who received bystander exposure, such as shipyard workers exposed to asbestos being used by insulators, wives who washed their husbands' asbestos-covered work clothes or people who lived near asbestos mines or factories. In Australia, campaigners are anticipating two more waves of disease amongst home renovators working on asbestos-contaminated properties and people in the asbestos removal industry.

### THE HUMAN FACE OF A GLOBAL TRAGEDY

To give the theoretical constructs described above a human face, let's take a brief look at some of those whose lives have been sacrificed to asbestos.

#### **Wave 1: Asbestos Miners, Millers and Factory Workers**

##### *Miners*

**Jung Ji-Yul** was an asbestos miner in Korea from 1957-58. In 2008, he was diagnosed with asbestosis. He is a leader of the asbestos victims' movement in Korea and has spoken about Korea's asbestos epidemic in Japan, India, Hong Kong and Thailand.

**Hendrik Afrika** contracted asbestosis having worked at a South African asbestos mill when he was a boy. Hendrik's lawsuit against the foreign owner of the mill was part of a class action brought by South African asbestos claimants in an English court. When the case was won (2003), a trust in his name was set up to distribute court-awarded compensation to the injured.

##### *Factory Workers*

**Alice Jefferson** worked at an English asbestos factory in 1935. Decades later, she was diagnosed with the asbestos cancer mesothelioma. In 1982 Alice was the focus of a television

documentary watched by nearly six million people which revolutionized the asbestos debate in Britain. She died at aged 47, leaving behind a fifteen-year old son and a five-year old daughter.

As a student **Aldo Vicentin** worked as a warehouse keeper at the Eternit asbestos-cement factory in Osasco, Brazil from 1964 to 1968. He became a lawyer and a founding member of the Brazilian Association of the Asbestos-Exposed. He died of mesothelioma on July 3, 2008, aged 66.

## **Wave 2: Asbestos Users**

**Fred “Bud” Harvey** contracted asbestosis having worked as a marine electrician at a shipyard in Massachusetts. He formed a local victims’ group called the Organization of Federal and Former Federal Employees Rights. He died of his disease in 1989.

**Saneshiro Nakamura** was a Japanese carpenter and a former President of the Japan Association of Asbestos Victims and their Families. In 2011, he died of mesothelioma, aged 63. When details of the national asbestos scandal became headline news in Japan in 2005, Saneshiro told journalists “Mesothelioma victims don’t have tomorrow, give me tomorrow.”

## **Wave 3: Building Users**

**Luisa Minazzi** was headmistress of a school in Casale Monferrato, a town at the epicentre of Italy’s asbestos epidemic. She was diagnosed in 2007 with mesothelioma, contracted from exposure to asbestos at school. She was an outspoken campaigner on asbestos and worked with local groups to press the government to remove asbestos from all municipal schools. She died on July 6, 2010.

**Howard Willems** was a Canadian civil servant; as a food inspector he visited many buildings that contained asbestos. In 2010, Howard was diagnosed with cancer mesothelioma; he died, aged 59, at the end of last year (2012). Howard co-founded the Saskatchewan Asbestos Disease Awareness Organization and, for the last two years of his life, campaigned for the introduction of mandatory public asbestos audits of buildings in Saskatchewan. Howard’s Law was passed on April 18, 2013.

## **Bystander Exposure**

**Françoise Jonckheere** never worked with asbestos. Pierre, her husband, had been employed at an asbestos-cement factory in Belgium which was just meters from their house. In 1987, Pierre died of mesothelioma aged 60. Françoise’s exposure took place when she washed asbestos-contaminated work clothes and breathed air which the factory had polluted. At the age of 66, Françoise began a civil lawsuit against the asbestos company Eternit; when she passed away in July 2000, her family continued the action. On November 28, 2011 Eternit was, for the first time in Belgium, found guilty of “gross negligence” in causing the death of Françoise; the company was ordered to pay €250,000.

**Jeong-rim Lee** was diagnosed with mesothelioma in 2006. She had never worked with asbestos; as a child, however, she had lived near one of Korea’s biggest asbestos-cement factories. She was a wife, the mother of two children and an active member of the Ban Asbestos Network of Korea. In 2011 Jeong-rim went to India to plead for the end of asbestos

use: “No more asbestos, no more asbestos victims,” was her motto. Jeong-rim died on December 21, 2011.

The faces shown and the stories told of the asbestos victims from Europe, North America, Latin America, Asia and Africa have common threads. None of the people mentioned were warned that exposure to asbestos could cause disease; none were given protection from the hazardous exposures which would cause their illnesses. All of them wanted their stories to be told. By cooperating with journalists, photographers or filmmakers, by organising asbestos victims or by launching court cases their actions would pave the way for others. They were not afraid to challenge the status quo. In full knowledge of the financial power and political support enjoyed by the asbestos companies that harmed them, they became the public face of a private disaster. Their objectives remain our objectives: to raise awareness of the asbestos hazard, to achieve justice for the injured and to prevent future exposures.

### **TURKEY: ASBESTOS CONSUMER, PRODUCER AND EXPORTER**

Turkey was an asbestos producer, user and exporter. Domestic asbestos consumption, which began in the 1940s and ended when legislation was adopted outlawing its use (2010), equalled approximately one million tonnes. From 1929 to 1988 nearly 150,000 tonnes of chrysotile and tremolite asbestos fiber were produced in Turkey; annual production peaked in 1979 at 38,967 tonnes. Turkey was a net exporter of asbestos from 2007 to 2010.<sup>1</sup> As in other countries the presence of asbestos throughout the Turkish built and natural environment and within the lungs of its citizens poses an imminent hazard to human health.

The 2010 Turkish legislation prohibiting asbestos use was an important first step in addressing the national asbestos legacy. Banning asbestos helps contain the asbestos problem but does not eliminate it. In all likelihood, the one million tonnes of asbestos used in Turkey was incorporated into ten million or more tonnes of asbestos-containing building products, many of which are still in place. As buildings age, remediation work is undertaken which poses both an occupational risk to the workers and a public health risk to the wider community. When these buildings reach the end of their lives, they are demolished. Demolition without asbestos removal can create very high levels of airborne asbestos.

Last year’s (2012) commencement of a national urban renewal program could, unless due attention is paid to the presence of asbestos, create yet more asbestos victims in Turkey. An "Asbestos Control Action Plan," currently being implemented by the Turkish Ministry of Health and the National Public Health Institution, indicates the government’s acceptance of the need to raise awareness of the asbestos hazard and reduce human exposures.<sup>2</sup> Civil society – asbestos victims, trade unionists, doctors, academics, public health campaigners, NGO activists and citizens – has an important role to play in solving the asbestos problems faced by Turkey. There is no quick fix to deal with this public health issue; this can only be achieved by a long-term multi-stakeholder approach which will engage all sectors and groups of Turkish society.

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<sup>1</sup> Information sourced from the United States Geological Survey.  
<http://www.usgs.gov/>

<sup>2</sup> Koc I. *TSHK launches plan to prevent asbestos exposure*. April 21, 2013.  
<http://www.todayszaman.com/news-313235-tshk-launches-plan-to-prevent-asbestos-exposure.html>

## **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

The bad news is that there is a lot of work to be done; the good news is that there is a lot of help. For more than a decade members of the International Ban Asbestos Secretariat have been working collaboratively to address the devastation caused by asbestos in countries all over the world. Conferences, meetings, and information sessions have been held, working parties have been set up, joint initiatives have been mounted and texts have been published to disseminate accurate and up-to-date information and expose industry propaganda which claims that asbestos can be used safely under controlled conditions.

Today, April 28, is International Workers Memorial Day. For the second time, the importance of this day is being marked in Turkey by victims of occupational disease, family members, medical professionals and campaigners. We are proud to be taking part in today's activities and commit ourselves to fighting with you for asbestos justice in Turkey. Colleagues all over the world will be commemorating this day with conferences, demonstrations and the launch of asbestos outreach programs under the shared slogan "Remember the Dead, Fight for the Living." Let us honour the memory of so many asbestos pioneers by reaffirming our commitment to the battle for asbestos justice in Turkey, in Europe and around the world. An asbestos-free future is possible.