

The Contributions of Asbestos Victims to World Public Health

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Abstract

Those who have been victimized by asbestos exposure are those who lived or worked around asbestos without knowing of its presence or danger. This grouping, through their desire for compensation and for justice, is the engine, which pulls this public health question through world society. The author lists over a dozen contributions to world public health, which have been made by asbestos victims. Asbestos is a very cheap product to use if the entire social cost is not known. When the social cost is fully known asbestos is a very expensive product to use. The asbestos victims have illustrated the hidden social costs in many different ways and therefore deserve the support of the general public and particularly the public and environmental health officials.

Those people who have contracted asbestos disease face a life of misery (Hills, p, 40). This is due to the progressive destruction of their bodies from tumors, scarring, infections, organ failure and slow strangulation (Seidman, et. al. p.482). Most of us with asbestos caused disease have done nothing to deserve our condition (Cullen, p.7). All we did do was go to work or to live with those that did (Anderson, et. al. p.145-156). We were first concentrated in the mining areas, then in the transportation and manufacturing of asbestos and its products. Later you could find us amongst construction workers (Selikoff, p.27). Eventually, asbestos fibers would be lodged in almost every lung in the United States (Langer, A.M, p.162). Unfortunately, as asbestos use was taken around the world, asbestos disease followed (Takahashi, et.al. p.10).

The innocent victims of this toxic tragedy face a powerful industry, made up of asbestos mine owners, transporters, manufacturers, insurance, regulatory, public relations and medical personnel (Moss, p.287). These legions are mustered to expand and defend the use of this crushed mineral (Proctor, p.122). They compose a vast economic army, organized to protect the industry and therefore to deny the victims compensation or to pay for clean-up of the environment (Safchuck, p.5).

We are victims because we were not told about the hazards of asbestos, we were not warned, and we were not protected (Selikoff, p.4). This exposure was done to us by an industry that knew we would get sick from the exposure (Castleman, p.581). We were victimized. We are the innocent recipients of the greatest industrial toxin known to humanity (MMWR, p.1); an intense poisoning that has lasted over a century (Moss, p.287). This is why we are called victims, because of our innocence. It was not fate that determined our exposure but roomfuls of professors, doctors, industrial hygienists, lawyers, politicians, business-persons and particularly those who amassed fortunes from their “asbestos industry” investments (Castleman, p.699).

Most of what the average person hears about the ‘asbestos victims’ is distorted by the asbestos industry’s medical and “spin” doctors (Moss, p.235). The amount of victims is constantly underestimated by the pompous industry “experts” (Safchuck, p.3). In the creation of the Manville Personal Injury Trust, Judge Weinstein listened to these elements. He ignored information provided by the White Lung Association (WLA, p.1). As a result, hundreds of thousands of asbestos victims are paid only a few hundred dollars because the Fund was so terribly under financed (WLA, p.2). The asbestos industry, the insurance industry, many leaders of industrial and financial capital all push to underestimate the true magnitude of their asbestos exposure and disease epidemic (Moser, p.1).

In a classic example of the Thief yelling “Stop thief” to misdirect attention from their deeds, the asbestos industry has many “consultants” walking up and down the street trying to defame the innocent victim (Berenson, p.A1). The editorial pages are filled with attacks on the victims, accusations the victims are not really sick, that they got sick from something else or “it was someone else’s asbestos” (Epstein, p.422-432). The politicians who bluster the loudest about “personal responsibility” and “Defending America” forget their words when it comes to holding the industry responsible or defending those whose labor build the USA. How can demagogues, charlatans, hypocrites and gangsters provide justice?

The industry lies about the time and amount of exposure that the worker suffered (Peacock, p.83). It tries to hide behind smoking and personal habits of the worker (Moss, p.288). The industry was influential in ensuring that US workers were allowed to be exposed to 200,000 fibers an hour in 1986 (Federal Register, p.2265). In the United States and throughout the world, there was and still is a consistent effort to conceal warnings and the true nature of the asbestos hazards (Castleman, p.830). The asbestos industry fights on, moving responsibility from mining, to product manufacturer, to multiple product use, to environmental exposure. However, at each juncture, the asbestos industry is defeated, their lies are exposed and their product is shunned by a widespread

public revulsion of asbestos. It is ironic to note that so much human research concerning asbestos hazards took place because each type of exposure had to actually “count bodies” before regulation could take place. Industry stubbornness has caused all shapes, sizes and types of asbestos, used under all sorts of circumstances, to be tested. Asbestos victims represent the fastest growing and largest group of work related lung disease (CDC, p.3).

The cycle of profit/misery/pollution/disease always ends with the bankruptcy of the asbestos industry. The more successful they are in the business of distribution of asbestos, the more unlikely that they are going to be able to pay for the people injured and killed by their product. The more sales and success in distribution, the larger the killing ground. This industry, particularly its Canadian variant, moves around the world causing disease in country after country (Tossavainen, p.22).

Twenty-nine countries have voted to stop this madness; they have reached the only intelligent solution with asbestos, that is to Ban Asbestos. The Ban of asbestos is the first step in halting the epidemic of asbestos disease. We hope the contributions the asbestos victims have made to public health will be recognized and used as the basis for a worldwide ban. The contributions to world public health made by asbestos victims are:

1. First of all, *we took some asbestos with us*; those mineral spears embedded in our bodies are trapped and can kill no more.
2. We have *provided medical data for the entire world*. Asbestos victims have been the subjects of thousands of medical studies, which have proven the ill *effects of asbestos* exposure on humans (Lemen, R., Bingham, E., p.484). The toxicity of asbestos has more human research than any other single toxin (Peters and Peters, pp.533-717).
3. The epidemiological studies done with victims of asbestos disease have shown that there *is no safe level of asbestos exposure* (NIOSH, p.32).
4. The evaluation of asbestos exposure and its effects on human beings has *shown that all types of asbestos* cause disease and death (NIOSH, p.32).
5. Asbestos victims *provide a collective memory* to help society focus on the horrible problem of asbestos. The simple answer to the industry’s revival of asbestos is to point to the graves generated by the past use of asbestos (WLA, p.3).
6. The asbestos victims *defend and expand the legal rights of all society when they defend their own rights*. The struggle for compensation has not just benefited rights of those in the USA. Asbestos victims in Brazil, South Africa, France, Italy, Netherlands, France, England, Australia and other

countries have fought successfully for legal rights that benefit everyone. Key legal action by the asbestos victims inspired public health law and the elimination or severe restriction of asbestos use (Peters and Peters, pp.261-284).

7. Asbestos victims provide logistical, political, emotional and financial support, to **ban asbestos**. Asbestos Victims throughout the world *provide the reasons to ban asbestos*. Asbestos victims are dedicated to awaking and organizing the world to eliminate this toxin and clean up the pollution (WLA, p.1).
8. Asbestos victims in the United States *have presented two specific legal programs to* resolve the problems of asbestos exposure. The first is the program of the WLA. This program offers an alternative to the victim who would individually forgo their legal rights in return for \$25,000.00 lump sum and \$2,000.00 a month non-off-setting to other retirement or disability. The victim and their immediate family would be guaranteed health care at no expense. Second is the Occupational Disease Act submitted by a joint committee of the Brown Black and White Lung organizations? This is model legislation for occupational disease. These and many other programs have been submitted to the world community as methods to properly compensate the victims.

Regardless of the groups to whom I am speaking, whether scientific conference, union hall, environmental meeting, school, church or university, there has never been a time that someone has not come up afterwards to share their story, their lost loved one, their friend or coworker, friend or relative. Asbestos has touched us all; if we cannot control this mineral monster, then how can we expect to control lead, mercury, nitric oxide or anything else.

What brings all of us together is our humanity, but the engine pulling this public health train is the power of the victims, their presence, their persistence, their refutation of the industry lies, their scientific, physical, emotional and moral statements of fact. **It is the victims' pain and loss, which moves each of us, and all of society, toward the World Wide Ban of Asbestos.**

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