

## Problems Faced by Shipbuilding Communities

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### Abstract

*This paper will examine asbestos-induced problems faced by shipbuilding communities. It will also discuss the value of a multi-agency approach and raise the question of wider collaboration on asbestos matters. Joint working and shared experience across these affected groupings at several levels could be helpful in a number of key areas. It is hoped that this discussion may lead us closer to the long-term strategy which is required for effectively dealing with the international asbestos epidemic as it affects shipyard communities. High values are placed on protecting the local environment, community safety and support for asbestos victims, their families and carers. This requires political intervention at the highest level and the support of a number of major international agencies.*

### Introduction

As a starting point we must acknowledge that there are similarities in the asbestos-induced problems faced by shipbuilding communities. West Dunbartonshire Council has in recent times had the pleasure of organising receptions for asbestos campaigners from Japan, Canada and Australia. In addition to this, we had the benefit of attending international round table meetings in London at which we met many of our international friends. This experience leads us to put forward for discussion the value of a multi-agency approach and raise the question of wider international collaboration on asbestos matters as they affect local shipyard communities. Joint working and shared experience across these affected groupings at international, national and regional levels could be helpful in a number of key areas.

### Long-term strategy

It is hoped that this discussion may lead us closer to the strategy which is required for effectively dealing with the mesothelioma epidemic as it affects shipyard communities. High values are placed on protecting the local environment, community safety and support for asbestos victims, their families and carers. In view of the high age range of many shipyard asbestos victims high priority must be given to providing support and services for this group. Despite cultural diversity and differing political systems great similarities exist. In order to advance the cause of asbestos sufferers, particularly the elderly, in shipyard areas coordinated international pressure must be

applied. This requires political intervention at the highest level and the support of a number of major international agencies.

### **Historical legacy**

Clydebank in West Dunbartonshire, Scotland is typical of many shipyard towns throughout the world. There are specific causal factors which can be identified in most towns and cities which experience an above average incidence of asbestos-related illness. High on the list is usually a history of shipbuilding, heavy industry or asbestos manufacture. In many cases it is a historical legacy as the yards and factories which utilised large quantities of asbestos materials are no longer in operation and therefore the jobs which they provided are not now available to the local community. This is the experience of the town of Clydebank in almost text book fashion. For almost a century Clydebank was a hub of industry and famous for its shipyards and engineering works. In addition to this, there was the Turners' Asbestos Cement factory which operated for nearly 32 years from 1938 until it closed in 1970. There was also the giant Singer sewing machine factory which opened in 1884 and ceased production in June 1980.

### **HSE Statistics**

The most recently available national statistics published by the Health & Safety Executive (HSE) on mesothelioma mortality in Great Britain are analysed by geographical area. The link between mesothelioma and heavy asbestos exposures in the shipbuilding industry is emphasised within the HSE document which was published in late 2003. It is widely acknowledged that asbestos was used widely in ships as insulation and workers were exposed during fitting out and ship-breaking activities. The HSE research confirms that the highest mesothelioma excesses in males tend to be those which are situated around shipyards, ports and dockyards. Areas in the UK hardest hit by the mesothelioma epidemic mainly due to shipbuilding are West Dunbartonshire, Glasgow City, Barrow-in-Furness, Plymouth, Portsmouth, South Tyneside, North Tyneside and Southampton. The broad geographical spread of the hardest hit areas throughout the UK should be noted by the high number of shipyard communities which are included. In the UK most of the twenty Local Authority areas worst affected by asbestos-related illness have an association with shipyards, dockyards or ports.

### **Scotland**

In addition to West Dunbartonshire, in Scotland, areas with significantly elevated SMRs include Fife, Glasgow City, Inverclyde and Renfrewshire. Due to these shipbuilding areas being a higher proportion of its industry; Scotland has a significantly higher SMR than the average for Great Britain; once again the shipyards, dockyards or ports factor is apparent.

## **British Medical Journal**

The British Medical Journal (BMJ) in an editorial article recently indicated that one in every hundred men born in the 1940s will die of malignant pleural mesothelioma, which is almost exclusively a consequence of exposure to asbestos, with a lag time that is rarely less than 25 years and often more than 50 years from first exposure. Half of all cases are now aged over 70, with 80% in men. For a man first exposed as a teenager, who remained in a high-risk occupation, such as insulation, throughout his working life, the lifetime risk of mesothelioma can be as high as one in five. As exposure in the United Kingdom continued until 1980 the peak of the epidemic is still to come.

## **New procedures**

Many of these people (who are elderly) were exposed in the shipbuilding industry and we urgently require strategies to assist them. New procedures, including radical surgery for mesothelioma patients, are being developed in different parts of the world. Improvements in any of these areas must be made available universally for the benefit of asbestos sufferers in all countries. However, the responsibilities of governments, researchers and health professionals in the developed world must be emphasised. We have a duty to those people in the developing countries who are still suffering significant exposures to asbestos.

## **Women workers and gender discrimination**

Wives and daughters of shipyard workers who washed the overalls of shipyard workers are among those who have died. In addition to this it is often forgotten that many women were employed in the shipbuilding industry in jobs which exposed them to asbestos. Among these were French polishers, cleaners and other female shipyard employees. Problems specific to female asbestos sufferers and widows must be addressed in order to deal with undercurrents of gender discrimination in several areas including difficulties in accessing proper compensation. Research by the Fawcett Society and others indicate that, in the UK, elderly women are further disadvantaged because they have broken employment service because of child rearing responsibilities. This results in much reduced or nil occupational pension at time of greatest need.

## **Imports and exposure**

Asbestos was a valuable and versatile material and imports rose after World War Two when it was widely used in the construction of vessels world-wide. The material found a place in shipbuilding and was used extensively in the industry. It was a convenient partitioning material that combined insulation and fire-proofing. About 90% of deaths due to mesothelioma are due to exposure to asbestos in unmonitored settings in the shipbuilding industry. In the UK imports were at the highest from about

1955 to 1980. The peak of the epidemic is expected in 2015 to 2020 when the death rate is likely to be 2000 per year in the United Kingdom. The situation in Europe is similar. The BMJ forecast 100,000 mesothelioma deaths in the developed world in the next 25 years. Imports continue in the developing world. A significant proportion of these asbestos sufferers will be clustered among an elderly population in shipbuilding communities throughout the world.

### **International initiative**

Many countries are seeing the rising tide of the mesothelioma epidemic. Doctors in local communities need to know how to recognise and diagnose asbestos-related disease and what treatments are available for patients. Much more needs to be done in the care of mesothelioma patients including early and efficient diagnosis. Without this there can not be meaningful efforts made in respect of medical treatment and access to radical surgery, legal matters, social care and advice, state benefits and other services. Joint working, shared information and experience into asbestos problems faced in shipyard communities allow us to benefit from economies of scale through reducing duplication of resources. Properly funded research in a number of key areas is urgently required. Within an international initiative special attention should be afforded to the many problems of elderly asbestos sufferers. This could include support for asbestos victims support groups and the setting up of telephone information lines which are equipped to give out the most up-to-date information to asbestos sufferers and their families.

Achievement of best practice in all areas of service delivery including all aspects of medical and health care, social care and access to advice and support services requires intervention and funding at the level of national governments, European Union, World Health Organisation and trade union bodies including the International Labour Organisation (ILO). Successful programmes in shipbuilding communities can provide a blueprint for the finest local models becoming the accepted norm on an international scale. We must move forward from this conference and work together to secure resources which address the problems faced by shipbuilding communities.

**NOTE:** Andy White served as Convenor of the COSLA asbestos working group; Tommy Gorman served as Policy Officer of the COSLA asbestos working group.