

The Harsh Reality

From the dawn of time man has depicted himself through what he did, be it hunting or his marriage rites. As time passed these actions were superseded by his ability to write.

Writing was an evolutionary step, a discovery that gave us the ability to convey messages that could be passed down generations; messages that express dreams and disappointments, joys and sorrows, feelings and emotions. In fact writing gave us the capability to describe any eventuality known to man. The following describes one such instance.

This story cannot be compared with those found on Mayan pyramids, on Egyptian obelisks and in parchment, even indeed in the Bible. It's simply about an innumerable number of innocent people from around the world, being sacrificed upon the altar of progress. This progress was driven by competition, technology and productivity.

This is the story of asbestos and its impact on hundreds of thousand of lives.

Asbestos is a natural product that was extracted, with little regard to Health and Safety, from natural deposits. By the 1900 its use increased exponentially because of its resistance to heat, manufacturing versatility and relative cheapness. In particular it was found extensively in roofing, piping and lagging.

The first signs of its hazardous nature appeared after a sharp rise in cancer cases in predominately industrial and mining areas. Incidences were the highest where it had been used as blocks. The alarm was raised in the mid twentieth century on confirming a correlation between cancer and asbestos.

Although knowing full well the human suffering involved, global vested interests have done little to eradicate asbestos extraction and use, leaving aside the drain on countries' respective health services and welfare bills. In advanced countries such as Italy (from 1993), sufferers of asbestos related diseases are medically retired on full pension. In our own province, Friuli Venezia Giulia (FVG), a register of all known sufferers is kept, so that financial assistance is available for any legal redress and/or medical treatment.

The presence of asbestos in existing buildings and ducting is a subject yet to be fully addressed. Anything built before 1980 may have asbestos including roofing sheets for barns, warehouses and garages and houses using incorrectly treated asbestos based cements. Other examples include lagging and insulation in old boilers.

It is important that people recognise that controlled disposal of asbestos is paramount. Specialised contractors, trained in handling asbestos need to be used ensuring no environmental contamination as well as risk to health.

Engagement with such specialists is a costly task, so much so that the ordinary man on the street may favour disposal via his own inexpensive means. Numerous examples in the public eye have cited instances of fly tipping of asbestos in fields, woods canals and even the grottos on the Karst.

In principle regional Law 22 is a good one but unfortunately it simply isn't funded adequately to function properly. The FVG register that exempts payment to sufferers was overlooked in 2006 and become untraceable a year later. There is also the problem of adequately funding families who are confronted with removing asbestos from their homes. There are local council schemes around Gorizia to help private home-owners, but again so inadequately funded to really deter dumping.

Faced with being an asbestos exposure hotspot - materials were used in all types of local shipyards and power stations - a study was initiated on all sufferers of asbestos related disease s; even Gorizia council financially chip in. Monfalcone Hospital oversaw the

Commento [Unknown A1]: Cut first three para's to something like: From the dawn of time man has depicted himself in various ways such as wall paintings showing hunting scenes. This is until the advent of writing. It gave us the ability to convey all our thoughts and feelings to each other and to each generation thereafter. This story was written with such a purpose. It is not akin to great works as the Bible, but is one that illustrates how human lives were and still are sacrificed on the altar of progress. It is a story of asbestos.

management of the study, called Atom, with contributions being made by other oncology departments within the region. Its merits are in its constituents parts.

The Atom study started in 2002. Naturally a trawl of the whole population was impossible, so volunteers exposed to asbestos were screened. A procedure was created whereby potential candidates knew what was entailed - blood tests, spirometry (breathing into a measuring tube), ultrasound and CAT scans.

Everyone who joined the scheme thought they were as clean as a whistle, but some were in for a shock. The preliminary investigations unearthed an unforeseen situation that was confirmed six months later; 70% of cases examined presented an accumulation of asbestos in the form of plaques and nodules in people's lungs.

Faced with this reality, Monfalcone Hospital, which had never before confronted such a situation, targeted the critical cases leaving the others being monitored either annually or quarterly for nine months or the year. Those who had plaque dimensions of more than 6.8 mm were operated on. This book conjures up what they went through: their fears and confronting the unexpected.

The hospital staff at Monfalcone were certainly up to the medical tasks set by Atom, but I feel those physiological were not. Despite all the care and attention paid by doctors in explaining the risks involved, it was still difficult to convey to people such as welders, carpenters and pipe fitters, the difference between lung cancer, a benign and malignant lump, carcinoma and mesothelioma. The medical staff naturally assumed that individuals fully understood what was being said to them, so some underestimated the seriousness of their condition and others overreacted. Accordingly people acted in diverse ways; some acted irrationally, others asked for a second opinion at their own expense.

Another result of the Atom study was that their findings were submitted to all stakeholders including the legal and statutory authorities such as Inail (Italian National Insurance Agency paying compensation for Industrial Injuries and Diseases).

As the programme continued, its findings were now subject to scrutiny by Inail and after a few months of their involvement it got, in my opinion, a bureaucrat nightmare. To get compensation, a 6% disability had at least be present; in effect a full or partial lung removal or mesothelioma. I know of only one case. Against this minimal recompense, free health services were given, but wait for it, only on those conditions relating to the disease.

As for the medical papers submitted to the office of Gorizia's Procurator dealing with Occupational Diseases (equivalent to the UK's Health and Safety Executive - HSE), the situation remains unresolved. Their HSE has opened a file for each victim and apprised all parties of their contents. Eventually after investigations of up to five years, executives of Fincantieri SpA, - major Italian shipyard owners - were cited as responsible for asbestos contamination.

A further sweep for possible additional victims and defendants was made given that deaths had peaked at around 31 in 2002-3 and up until 2010 plateaued out at 15-16 per year. These figures represent only one spot on our globe where asbestos was used. If globally replicated elsewhere, Chernobyl then becomes insignificant.

Also on the legal front, l'AEA (the Association of Asbestos Exposed) started civil proceedings against Fincantieri for compensation for sixty widows. Already one widow has been awarded compensation by a Trieste court, but Fincantieri lodged an appeal to the Supreme Court who will deal with it in their own good time.

Meanwhile the numbers in the Atom screening exercise soared as people became more aware of and consequently febrile over operations performed on colleagues. During this period, I became involved in "Spyraglio", an association based in Monfalcone that transported cancer patients to and from their various regional radiography centres. Through

the association, I met their resident psychologist, Dr. Corinna Michelin. With her tireless support a self help group for those exposed to asbestos was formed. Another professional stalwart of the group was Dr. Bianchi, a retired pathologist, but also leading national and international expert on asbestos. Dr Zanin of Monfalcone's medical department clarified anything we did not understand.

Our self help group undertook the onerous task of going out to the community in and around Monfalcone and using halls. We found those who had been exposed to asbestos, provided feedback to health screening service, gave updates on clinical discoveries, but more importantly gave moral support to those who felt alone and simply test bed experiments. Over two our outcomes were as follows: as already said 70% of those seen had asbestos fibres present; 10% underwent surgery, 2.3% for a carcinoma, 1% for mesothelioma.

Then it became apparent patients were no longer being offered screening and our group asked for a reason. It was discovered that prolong exposure to radiation was in itself dangerous. The CAT scans were suspended.

Our group then asked that details of this decision be posted out to all those concerned, but a year elapsed before this was done.

Being cognisant of an illness is an essential requisite of any treatment, but what is equally important, as far as I'm concerned, is that every effort is made to treat it. By stopping the CAT scans can it be said that this was being done?

What now remains of the Atom initiative is the right to ask for a spirometry test, a medical examination with further tests if something is found. Using this procedure the lung cancer may spread and then it would be too late. So we ask ourselves "Are we living by virtue of being sick or healthy."

According to Inail we are healthy, but it's more complicated. Paraphrasing Hamlet who "will be or not be" struck down with this unabated game of asbestos Russian Roulette. That is the question we all ask ourselves?

Every time we attend an ex-colleagues funeral, as a result of asbestos, there is a sense of hopelessness, resignation. With him also goes the memories of working together.

Each time we walk up to the cemetery it's like replaying a film, watching the same scenes: thinking that of our campaigns together; the toil and sweat of union battles; wearing out shoe leather when demonstrating for better working conditions; putting our country's woes to right perhaps heatedly, but always constructively. The harsh reality only sinks in when we hear the Eulogy. Unfortunately the plot remains the same, only the cast changes.

It's said that death is part of life. It stands up if someone completes the span of his natural life, but it doesn't if it's prematurely arrived at simply because someone wants to make a profit. I simply think it's wrong to equate a life to a tool, one that can be discarded when it is of no use and cannot remain silent when just retired ex-colleagues moan on. Death is everywhere in the book, but it's also a warning to prevent repetition.

Most people think that having banned asbestos, the problem has gone away. This is just the first step, alternatives such as fibreglass and rock wool are also not in the clear. The EU have become concerned over the use of toxic man made materials that can cause tumours or allergies. Europe are faced with soaring health costs and consequently wants to take shelter by limiting or banning substances that can damage our lives and environment.

Why do we take out additional insurance cover for our life, home and an injury? It's because we coexist with the fear of losing everything we strived for, but our best insurance is simply prevention.

Those of us who have been exposed to asbestos want to send , with this book, a message to our family and friends - avoid using stuff that gives you cancer and the figures speak for themselves.

Although the thought of it is not so scary as twenty, fifty years ago, one in three of us will get cancer and because of medical advances, 50% of us will recover. But to fully understand this book, you have to understand mesothelioma. Whereas most tumours, if found in time, might be curable, mesothelioma victims' survival rates are negligible after at most four years from being diagnose. Maybe now people will understand mesothelioma victim's feeling of loss when diagnosed with this disease.

Knowing when you are about to die is tragic, knowing how is terrifying. Those who have comfort those dying like this are able to recount how people gradually suffocate, clinging to an oxygen tank.

So you have to ask yourself, how can modern research find cures for a significant number of tumours, but cannot for mesothelioma . Is it lack of interest, research or is the disease simply difficult to overcome? FVG has centres of Oncology excellence. It also Universities that seemingly cooperate in research. It is also able to legislate without central government interference. So can it not pull all these facilities together to give a glimmer of hope to mesothelioma sufferers and those who live under an asbestos Sword of Damocles, seemingly healthily, but in reality badly.

Finally I thank my region for sponsoring this book and also in anticipation any support for a cure.