

Way back in 1970, I returned home after spending three years working in Australia as a welder and boilermaker, building central power stations and oil and gas platforms.

After taking a month off, I then found sub contract work for Danieli in Udine. At that time, I wanted to see if I could reintegrate myself into provincial life or need to go abroad again. My thoughts centred upon the various pro's and con's in respect of family and economics, but especially the attraction of our local young women.

As a result of the Arab Israeli Three Day War and the closure of the Suez Canal, there was a world fuel crisis that generated a demand for supertankers that could take the Cape route to Europe. Although the lion share for this demand was snapped up by South Korea and Japan, the shipyard in Monfalcone had a long track record of building such specialised ships. So face with the prospects of permanent work, I joined it in 1971. At that time they had around 6000 employees and being used to working on large sites, I was suitably impressed.

On starting, I found it tough going as I found myself in a noisy working environment with caulking agents ever present and grinding dust and welding fumes contaminating the air. The only consolation was whispered by a work colleague, "if you think this is bad, try working on the ships." To give you some idea how things have changed from 1970, once the smoke from welds was simply fanned around the workshop. It took union intervention to eventually have extractors with filters installed.

Despite having worked in many different sites, the first time I worked on board ship was an eye opener. Working in the workshop was bad enough, but working on board meant running up and down gangways, dodging drops of molten and scrap iron from welders working on the floors above, leaving aside the X raying of welds and painting. It was of little surprise that accidents rates were high.

Industrial diseases were generally hearing loss or silicosis. Relatively speaking these were minor when compared to mesothelioma, a disease that you picked up cladding pipes and tanks with asbestos lagging and then inadvertently taking the dust home on our overalls.

At the time no one warned me of the dangers and I was not alone. On submarines asbestos shields when welding sheets and the material was in seals and other stuff and being totally ignorant of this I too starting working on them and carried on doing so. At the time, our first concern was protecting ourselves from intense heat, dehydration and hypertension, so much so that we negotiated rest breaks with the company under the auspices of our

Occupational Health service.

By the late 1970's I had become a factory union representative and people started talking about asbestos and its link with the rising rate of mesothelioma cases and its use in the shipyard, but the unions were perhaps more concerned about our jobs than health risks as experts told us that the disease needed 30- 70 years to appear. All the same the health services contacted the yard to find alternatives to asbestos.

By the 1980's asbestos was being gradually phased out in submarine construction with materials that were made off site. To give you some idea of the task involved, a juggernaut with trailer was needed to strip out the asbestos coatings of two submarine hulls. Everything went, even the washers.

But by then the damage had been done, as we had for years ground off this coating before we undertook welding repairs. Everything was contaminated within the submarine and although enhanced rapid through put extractors were used within its confines, air pollution were above legal limits. So even with these precautions was anything achieved?

After all the deaths I think not.

By the mid 80's, asbestos use was minimal especially in the next generation of subs., but it took until 1992 to legally eliminate it completely.

Reflecting upon how long it took to achieve this aim one has to consider what happened in the meantime. No worker really understood the dangers of asbestos, but the company did and if they did, the law makers certainly did. I never got a straight answer when I asked why my colleagues had died so early over the last 15 years.

Faced with this track record I too went for a check-up at a day surgery of the Occupational Health Department of Trieste Hospital. After a tense ten day wait, my results proved negative.

In 1993 legislation came out that allowed employees who had worked with asbestos for over ten years the right to take early retirement. For my firm Fincantieri this was a golden opportunity to restructure and rid itself of its loss making divisions in Italy. Its main site, Monfalcone, got rid of just around hundred people using this law. The catch was who determined who could go under this rule was INAIL – Italian Social Security – and they based this upon the information given by the employers.

And why were Fincantieri so reluctant in coming forward with the information on those exposed to asbestos? The answer is possibly twofold: they wanted to restructure, but in such away to remap their business to the growing and lucrative cruise ship market. This action would drag the company out of the red.

I could appreciate the action of the company in having to find suitably qualified replacements, but a contradiction soon became apparent that added fuel to the flame.

By the mid 1990's the number of mesothelioma cases had exploded; employees from their civilian sites now relocated to Monfalcone were eligible for early retirement, but us others were not as we were deemed military. Some accord brokered by the Unions could possibly have resolved the skill shortage and who could go, but I at the time I saw no attempt being made to break the impasse. So I started to put pressure on our unions bosses.

It was hitting your head against a brick wall. Forty of us then took legal action against the firm and after two years then asked for the resignation of our works council. We were on a collision course with the Union.

While we could see that our sclerotic legal system would take its time, our questioning of our own union probably forced their hand, negotiations with the company and government departments started. 2000 was our turning point as everyone accepted that any welder working in either a military or civilian shipyard between 1979 and 1986 became eligible. The first tranche of those eligible were released on the 1st July 2000, a month later another tranche composing those who had taken legal action against the firm.

In making a quick calculation, I reckoned that 14 years of exposure would enhance my pension by 7 years. I had already paid in 35 years, so became eligible to retire. By Fincantieri not coming forward with the information , I like many others, had worked two to three more years than we needed to.

All the same we bagged what we wanted – early retirement – something I had longed for. In my case, I spent my first month in retirement taking in the summer sun by the sea, but from September onwards I started fixing all those things around the house that I had long so wanted to do and before winter set in. After three months of this, I realised that time was simply flying by and put this down to not being wedded to the factory clock. The happiness of managing my own time was indescribable, it was like a bird being given its freedom from a cage and being able to look down, for the first time, at the ground all around it. But like all good fairy stories, there was a sting in the tail.

In 2001, the Atom project, a trawl to scan all ex-expos for asbestos, commenced. I participated so that I could reaffirm my previous negative findings. This was run by the Occupational Health Department in Monfalcone, but was more intensive with a range of tests including MRI scans. My results, I was told, would be ready in fifteen days time.

After calmly waiting that time, I arrived at my appointment unperturbed as my lungs had never troubled me, but I found myself in front of the Head of Occupational Health who after attempting to put me at my ease told me of my results.

He then said "like 70% of people who we have scanned, you also have shadows on your lungs indicating that you have been in contact with asbestos. One lung has a 6mm lump that for the moment is no cause for alarm, but we would like to keep a three month check on it."

He then added "I'll give you these findings in writing so that you use it for any claim for Industrial Injury and forward onto the legal authorities."

Luckily I was seated when he told me this, because after he finished I really felt sick. It was like the ground had collapsed all around me leaving me speechless, petrified. I had never before been in this situation and certainly didn't really understand what the doctor was saying about lumps.

Not being an insecure type of person I reacted by asking the doctor to illuminate upon what she said. Seeing my tense face she said once again that if the CAT scan showed nothing had altered within three months then another would be made three months later. But if the lump had grown they would remove it using quickly healing key hole surgery.

For the doctor her it was her daily routine as to what she told me, but I was a simple metalworker with very little medical knowledge so as I tried to calm myself, I became more frightened. I was looking for something to sweeten this pill and could not. Realising that my further questioning of the doctor was making this worse, I picked up my case notes, thanked the doctor and went home with my past and now my future in my hand.

I swear blind that to this day, I cannot remember how I got home, but can only remember being seated in my kitchen wondering what to say to my family as we are all going through a rough patch: my son had business debts having gone self employed and my wife's health was none too good. She definitely would react badly to this news.

So what options did I have? I came up with the white lie that doctors had found something and were monitoring it to make sure it didn't turn into anything serious.

Having settled this family issue, I then resolved myself to cope with how I would react if after three months of waiting I was confronted with a worse case scenario. For someone who always slept like a log, I had my first sleepless night as I didn't want to be so unprepared again.

The following day I stopped working on all the projects I had on the house, my mind being totally absorbed on what the doctor had said. I had had a life building things such as oil platforms, but I couldn't distinguish between a benign or malignant growth, a cancer or mesothelioma and every time I met a fellow ex work colleague his account would confuse me even more. In the end I resolved to meet a leading expert in the field of this pathology, Doctor Bianchi. So started my twice weekly trudge between home and hospital where he patiently and simply answered my questions.

At the same time I became a voluntary worker for a local group, Spyraglio, transporting cancer patients, many elderly, who had problems attending treatment centres some, like Aviano, at considerable distance from their homes. It was through this group that I met Dr Michelin, a young graduate support psychologist whose role was to manage the psychological fallout from an asbestos screening programme called Atom.

Convinced that a self help group was needed, I asked the Spyraglio chairman, also a psychiatrist, for permission. He immediately reacted favourably to the proposal whose accomplishments still bear fruit today. So together with our psychologist we started on our uphill struggle of fitting the pieces of a medical problem together and overcoming a fear of the future that mentally blocked my mind, especially on hearing that other ex-colleagues had undergone surgery. I had started to think of only a cancer centric world, one that had your life governed by Russian roulette.

With being engaged in our sessions, my second scan soon became imminent after what seemed an interminable wait. I had three sleepless nights before the scan. Fortunately Dr Cassetti, the radiologist, didn't mess around on seeing the anxiety on my face and quickly put my mind at rest; the lump hadn't grown so I was down for only another three quarterly check ups, but decided to take my third after six months.

During the six months I attended the self help group twice a month and there found less fortunate ex-colleagues: one had the complete removal of a lung, others partial removals, the rest radiography. The most poignant cases were those where ex-colleagues had small signs of industrial injury with one scan

then three months later were showing signs of pleurisy with another.

Faced with this battering each day there were those who simply gave up, they would say: " my fellow sufferers, I'll try to hang on as long as possible, but if I have a calling call from Saint Peter either tomorrow or the next day what will be, will be and I don't care." The majority of us didn't feel like this and used our self help support group to overcome our fears and isolation.

The proof in the pudding is when I went to see an ex-workmate who cut himself off from the world on hearing that he needed an operation to his lung. I had not seen him for over a year and on seeing so was somewhat taken aback, he had lost 14 kilos and his wife had signs of cancer. He refused any help from me. I'm no psychiatrist, but it seemed that he was on a downward that downward depressive spiral.

It highlights the relational shortcomings between doctor and patient for if you do not take an holistic and consistent approach to curing someone, then the treatment remains incomplete. At the heart of our group therapy was the cognizance that our attitude towards the realities of life had altered and that we needed to reassess them through mutual support.

As for me, after two years of having six scans I realized that I things had gone quiet for a year. Noting this and in collaboration with others, I asked the screening authorities what had happened. Their response was that volunteers had been subjected to high doses of radiation over a short period and since no one knew of the possible side effects, screening had been suspended. I was unsure if I was more insulted than harmed for it felt that if the asbestos hadn't got me, the radiation would. In mitigation, I was told that since nothing had changed from my first scan, the likelihood of this remaining so was high.

In my humble opinion this optimism doesn't stack up. Statistics show that there is a year on incremental growth in the death rate from asbestos, with it peaking between 2010- 20.

I say this having been in the vanguard of using the latest technology over the last two and half years. I also know that if I go to a Radiologist he will advise me not to take any further scans, an Occupational Health physician will give me a complete check up but will only find problems that are too far gone, and the Benefit doctors will give me a clean bill of health.

So who do I believe?

There is screening mechanisms similar to the PSA blood sampling for prostate cancer. The trouble is that although it can predict a growth at least two years before there is a problem, there is as yet no cure. This is why we

“healthy” individuals in the self help group wrote this book.

We feel that by speaking out we can help others on our small planet who still work with asbestos and can see the future that awaits them. There are similarities with other carcinogenic materials that are part and parcel of our “Globalized world”. These also claim the lives of millions and thus our disease is not unique in this sense.

What we are really saying is that there needs to be a sea change in the way we live our lives, our reliance on high-tech solutions to the detriment of the animal and plant kingdoms and the enrichment of a few at the cost of many. We have an ethical duty to save the future for others. That is our humble submission found in our book.