

I'm Sick

Valerian Grossi

I've been exposed to asbestos dust and contracted an industrial disease as specified by Occupational Health.. So like many others, I've been identified, from 2003, with having a 1 cm non calcified thickening of the pleural membranes as well as asbestosis.

What I'm about to tell you is not the normal story concerning asbestos fibre exposure. In 2002 I was signed off sick as I had gradually become more and more fatigued when coping with the simple things of life, such as climbing the stairs. Such exertion made me break out in a sweat as I tried to catch my breathe. Eventually I knew something was amiss and decided to have a scan.

Convinced that there was correlation between my disease and asbestos, I contacted the Regional Occupational Health Centre that dealt with asbestos exposure. They did a scan immediately, but the results were not good. Holding my hand Mr Castelli, the consultant there, confronted me with the brutal reality of my disease. I then contacted the radiologist to discover more precise information on my condition. After lengthy questioning he said “ Not much can be done, you've got asbestos inside you, but don't give up hope.”

I started to search the internet to find out more about having inhaled asbestos particles. The more I discovered the more angry I became over those injustices I had suffered at work either from ex work colleges or ,more importantly, those in charge.

At work people knew I was good at my job, but also did not shirk from saying my piece if something was wrong.

By digging around, I became aware that even back in 1997, something may have been amiss with me and the all too rare scans done by my employers. I remembered that a doctor who did my Occupational Health check-up had said the lower part of my lung was not fully functional and routine follow up scans were needed. These were not done as he was transferred elsewhere. By rummaging through old medical records in my possession, I also found a medical report stating that my respiratory rates were below the norm. Successive ones were no better.

Regardless of this,the “company” doctor undertaking my medical review, ignored this evidence and said I was fit for work and was simply a malingerer. His data had showed that his readings of my lungs were within the norm. By now I had serious reservations over this check-up and managed to convince my colleagues that more specific scans were needed. Ultimately ones were granted and these results contradicted the “company” ones: nineteen out of twenty of my colleagues had asbestos related diseases; one is already dead with mesothelioma and another barely alive; the rest are down the same path with a 50% deterioration of their motor and respiratory functionality.

The legal stance when defining “employee” ,whether current or not,is that they are entitled to legal protection under Health and Safety. This is not solely by virtue of a check up, but by providing suitable working conditions. Although there is enough information to promote this, organisations try their level best to ignore these facts such as omitting to have a register to cite who has been exposed to asbestos. Consequently when Occupational Diseases lawsuits submitted, they are seemingly done so belatedly, are held up,or summary closed.

As for my tortuous attempts, I'll try to be brief.

I started work at Monfalcone Hospital in 1980 and placed in charge of steam turbines, but reality became also responsible for its air conditioning and hot water systems. I had had a maritime background having sailed, except for brief period at the start of my career, with Lloyd Triestino. This was from 1967 to 1980 and by 1973 I had risen to Chief Engineer within the Venetian(Italian) Merchant Navy and still being a crew member of Lloyd's fleet. So I when I turned up at my new job at the hospital I came from a somewhat different different. And after a while, I found to my shame little to do, relative to my previous job, but within a couple of years and using my mercantile experience I started to engage my new colleges in work gain from that sector. The first year of this experiment saw a 17% reduction in heating oil with no loss in service quality, so much so that the local TV and Radio reported upon it and the Regional Health Minister congratulated me. Then for no reason the experiment was stopped. And it was when I refused to undertake work on air conditioning filters, because such work was confined to specialized operatives, that I became under scrutiny from my employers and professional body, the Gorizian Chamber of Commerce. The filters were radioactive, requiring controlled disposal by ENEA (the Italian Environmental Agency) and not simply dumped in the normal waste for landfill, as practised by colleagues.

Even our own Hospital Managers simply did not intervene.

Following this there arose my requests to correctly dispose of the hazardous material simply laying around outside and the replacement of carcinogenic additives with those benign in the boilers, all materials that were vented externally to then be deposited around.

With the Social Security legislation a request to study the high incidents of tumours in boiler workers was made to our Hospital Management; nothing was done. I also asked for the disposal of asbestos stock – 200 kg - held in the Boiler Room since 1996. In 1995 I asked various authorities to provide me with some form of proof stating that I had worked with asbestos to cover my pension entitlements.

To date nothing unsubstantial has been forthcoming except from the Occupation Health Authorities, with a response that ENEL(an Italian Power Company) had no record of me ever working with asbestos. The trouble is I have never worked for them. The consequences, in my opinion, of not having a proper asbestos audit trail is serious, not only for me, but other ENEL employees.

I tried once again to get the Hospital Services to come up with some proof that I had worked with asbestos; their answer was to refute my assertion. This being so I asked the Regional Court to intervene and they directed that this important evidence be produced. What happened? Nothing – so I went back to the court; they instigated the same action with the same result. To date nothing has been forthcoming except an admittance by the Hospital Management that they had never submitted my medical records to Occupational Health.

A risk assessment was undertaken by Dr. Rosella of Benetto with the conclusion that the area around the boiler rooms did not show readings above the limits of asbestos fibres in a set volume of air – 100 fibres per litre. I thought this was absurd since the Occupational Health Asbestos journal states that most boiler operatives are subject to an annual average of 550 fibres per litre of air, adding that with respect to the Industrial Disease legislation of 1994, it can be assumed that asbestos exposure is an inherent risk in working in heating sector. I decided to take my case to law, but after preliminary investigations, my case was dismissed. However, I am not resting there as I believe that there has been a cover up.

Finally in 2000, I asked my soon to be ex employers to provide me with a handbook full of useful facts on working with asbestos as laid out in the 1994 Industrial Disease legislation. They said that none existed, therefore none could be supplied. I persisted even up to when being medically discharged by them. To date I still do not have a copy although employment law stipulates that such documents should be furnished as facilitating an ex employee find future work.

So, in 2004, when I found a medical certificate from the Occupational Health, I asked my former employers for a copy of my personnel file; again nothing doing. So I asked Ispesl (Istituto superiore per la prevenzione e la sicurezza del lavoro) – the Health and Safety Authority to examine my case, but they replied that the body had nothing specific on me, hence my eventual recourse to the courts.

Recently I found a document that purports that no company in the province of Gorizia uses asbestos as part of an industrial process, the only danger of exposure being in its removal from sites. Such a statement is ludicrous.

Hospitals used it until 30/11/1995, specifically at their site at Via Rossini. This has now been razed to the ground, but only after delays caused by the presence of asbestos., a fact picked up by both local and national papers. Also it isn't difficult to quantify the amounts of asbestos involved as in 1973, legislation dictated the dimensions of pipe lagging.

The same arguments apply to the old garrison hospital buildings in Via Galvani. The fire doors, after much shameful prevarication, have now been removed; but only after two maintenance workers have been certified as having contracted an Industrial Related Diseases – asbestosis. Service manuals at the Garrison Hospital stipulated that any lagging heating plant and piping had to be with asbestos.

What an incredible situation. We have an entity that purports to guarantee the well-being of its employees, but in reality basically failed to comply with a 1991 law that forbid any use of this material in hospitals and schools. Individual risk assessments in 2000, where limits were set at 33% asbestos dust contamination, did not overrule the prohibition of 1991.

Fincantieri(the dockyard) used asbestos until the 1990's and the proof lies with Lloyd's Register. Ships under flags of convenience entering Italian ports had sealed bunkers for containing blue asbestos, the most dangerous fibre. Most of this material was used in Italy, in fact mainly in Monfalcone. It wasn't common knowledge as it was deemed a strategic commodity and not readily available to all countries.

These were the places where I worked. It's absurd that I sought and still seek redress through the courts in Gorizia. Such action remains a constant drain on public funds .

The fact remains that the responsible authorities simply dilly-dally when faced with this ticking time bomb. Or even fail to involve themselves as the law directs.

The Ministry of Defence issued a circular in respect of military personnel exposed to asbestos and their possible early retirement rights as laid out in the legislation of 2003. It suggested that, for the moment, no details of contamination should be released by Ministry of Defence contractors as this could treat civilian workers less fairly if they found themselves in the same situation. An incredible situation and well established fact known also to Health and Safety which simply turn a blind eye. In fact it should do the reverse Health and Safety and intervene with every legal instrument at their disposal so that it recoup from the employers, who have used asbestos, any outlay incurred from public funds and individuals.

From 1995 I've suffered the ordeal of not only coming up against a bureaucratic brick wall, but as my disease progress, the undermining of not only mine, but my family's emotional equilibrium. Things have gone rapidly downhill since after the 2003 scan and from 2005 the deterioration of my lungs. I found the situation demeaning. I felt sick inside both physically and psychologically , because I knew that my hopes were going up in smoke. A myriad thoughts swirled around inside my head, to dissolve into an empty space filled with doubts and fears. I became taciturn, insular and introspective. I couldn't sleep. Over the following months, the news of the deaths of colleagues and getting nowhere with my compensation claims exacerbated the situation, finding contact with friends and family irksome. Even my grandchildren riled me.

It was then that I went to see with my wife, Dr Bertini at the Mental Health Centre. Not to

underestimated, he provided me, with the pharmaceutical and cognitive where with all to cope with the psychological fallout. For example when I'm about to have a bout of depression, I use cognitive therapy to manage it.

However there are certain things that get to me deep, deep inside, even more than the disease. I love my grandchildren more than anything in the world, but now they avoid me because they sense that they disturb the peace and quiet I crave. My children and their partners understand the situation, but they find this hard going. Who gets the brunt of my anger is my wife. Although she tries to be up beat, I still lash out at her. It's clear that, like many others in the same situation, my family simply put up with me and my moods.

As far as I concerned , if people had done their job properly my harrowing account would not have needed to be written.