

When love and home can kill

by Malcolm Brown.

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The dust has crept into the lives of everyone around the asbestos workers, reports Malcolm Brown.

HANK De Vries, 44, of Yallourn North in Victoria's Latrobe Valley, has mesothelioma. He breathes with difficulty and constantly takes painkillers but is thankful he is not on oxygen.

Having retired as an ashpalter in 2002 when the disease was diagnosed, he is now fully aware that as a child growing up in Moe, he played with his grandfather, also named Hank, and father, Bert, when they came home from work as power station ladders so covered in asbestos dust that they "looked like snowmen".

Neither grandfather nor father suspected anything and happily cuddled the youngster while still in their overalls. It is now thought that the young Hank breathed in some of those fibres.

In 1979, Hank Snr developed mesothelioma and his family saw him die in agony. The disease has apparently missed Bert, but he cannot say he is clear of the threat and has been traumatised to see his son get it. "I can tell you that my father is not impressed," said Hank, who himself has two children. "We are all very annoyed with James Hardie."

The asbestos scourge has hit families everywhere. The industry, whether mining or processing asbestos or using the products in their multitude of applications, attracted families because it was, like coalmining, good, solid work needing plenty of labour and assured of ongoing markets. Whole communities developed around it. But in places such as Sydney's Camellia or Adelaide's Elizabeth there is a horrible legacy.

Coalmining communities at least have known of the dangers of dust diseases and explosions and have been able to prepare for them. The asbestos scourge holds no such advantages.

Julie Owens, the Labor candidate for the seat of Parramatta in the federal election, says that as a result of her extensive doorknocking, she now realises "everyone in Parramatta knows someone who worked at Camellia and has died".

"The plant operated there for 50 years. It was a major employer. It attracted whole families, fathers and sons," Owens says. "A lot of people in the Maltese community worked there. There are thousands who have been through there and used the products, and out here in the west it is still everywhere."

Bernie Banton, vice-president of the Asbestos Diseases Foundation of Australia, started at the Camellia plant in 1968. "Of the 137 people who worked there, there are only seven of us left," he says. "More than 100 people who worked at the plant have died of asbestos diseases over the last 30 years." His three brothers, Ted, Albert and Bruce, also worked at Camellia and were all affected by their exposure. Ted died three years ago.

Colin Arthur, who worked at the Elizabeth plant from 1963 until 1981, has been on a

disability pension since 1987. Diagnosed in 1994 with asbestosis, he had developed silicosis because of the sand used in pipe manufacture. But that was not the end of it.

“My wife Barbara and daughter Terry-Ann developed pleural plaques [the mildest form of asbestos disease] through washing my overalls,” he says. “My eldest son, Colin John, has it too, and my second son, Dennis, has asbestosis. My brother John, whom I got a job at the plant, suffers from very bad asbestosis. I don’t know what is going to happen with my other three children. I did blame myself for a long, long time and then I realised James Hardie was the killer, not me.”

Thelma Day, from the NSW Central Coast, is the widow of Robert Day, who started working with an asbestos company in his native Bristol in 1946 and got jobs there for his three brothers. Robert migrated to Australia in 1965 where he resumed his trade as a lagger. Thelma said that of the 19 people who worked with Robert in Bristol, only one was still alive. In the early 1980s, while working as a supervisor at the Central Coast’s Eraring power station, Robert developed chronic bronchitis. In 1984 he was diagnosed with asbestosis. He tried working for some time after that but succumbed to incapacity.

“I found him sitting in the car crying,” Thelma says. “It was the first time I had seen him cry. He told me, ‘I went down the ramp, I could not get on the train, I have had it.’” After two years of having to be on oxygen full-time, Robert died in 1999.

Two of his brothers, Ron and Keith, who remained in Britain, also have died as a result of asbestos-related disease and the third, Richard, has pleural plaques. Thelma also had pleural plaques, from secondary exposure. She is encouraging those with the condition to try meditation. “I joined the Asbestos Diseases Foundation in 1984 and in 20 years many people have gone through my life and died from the effects of exposure to asbestos,” she says.

Terry Miller, secretary of the Asbestos Victims Association of South Australia, says his organisation has 400 members, almost all suffering from some form of asbestos-related disease. An asbestosis sufferer, he worked at Elizabeth from 1966 until 1987. “In the last three years we have lost 47 people to mesothelioma,” he says. “We lose a few all the time, probably 10 to 12 a year. We are getting these figures updated because now we are getting younger people.”

His wife, Margaret, died of lung cancer in 1979. “It might have been from the stuff I brought home over the years, I don’t know,” he says. “My son Scott worked at James Hardie for two years. He has not been affected but there is a long latency period. My daughter Karen used to help her mother wash my overalls. She has not been affected either but I have to keep watch.”

Queenslander Bill Read, who has mesothelioma from his four-year exposure to asbestos as a building supervisor more than 30 years ago, jokes that membership of the Queensland Asbestos Victims Support Society is always changing. “You rarely resign from this organisation,” he says.

Because of the delay in symptoms of the disease, which can be up to 40 years, the list of victims is far from complete. Asbestos disease can stay at the level of pleural plaques, but it can progress to asbestos-related pleural disease, lung cancer, asbestosis, and mesothelioma. With the latter, the victim is normally given 153 days to live from time of diagnosis.

Sometimes, the exposure might have been so minimal it has been all but forgotten.

Belinda Dunn, 36, of South Australia, was only three when her father did home renovation in Adelaide. She married in 1996 and had a baby in November 1997. A week later, she developed pneumonia, then cancer was diagnosed, followed quickly by a diagnosis of mesothelioma.

“It was such minor exposure,” she says. “The asbestos was lying on the ground for only a matter of perhaps a couple of weeks. We were kept away from it. I jumped on it once that people were aware of.”

Dunn, given nine to 18 months to live, has battled on, going overseas for gene therapy. She can only hope.