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AUSTRALIAN NAVY CONTINUES TO USE ASBESTOS

Asbestos

Asbestos is a mineral and it is a fibre. Its unique properties – flexibility, tensile strength, insulation (from heat and electricity) and chemical inertness – once gave it a reputation as one of the most useful and versatile minerals known to humanity. It is the only natural mineral that can be spun and woven like cotton or wool into useful fibres and fabrics.

At one time, asbestos was used in more than 3000 products. From 1950 to 1970, asbestos was just about everywhere. While the use of asbestos declined from the 1980's, asbestos continued to be imported into Australia until January 2004.

As a result many people in the community are likely to have been exposed to asbestos.

About asbestos related diseases

What diseases are asbestos related?

The diseases associated with asbestos are generally diseases of the lungs. The initial symptoms of asbestos related diseases tend to be breathlessness, fatigue and in some instances pain around the chest or ribs. These symptoms are similar to symptoms associated with other non-asbestos diseases, particularly other lung conditions. Consequently, it is critical before any conclusions are drawn about the possible relationship between a group of symptoms and asbestos that advice is obtained from a specialist medical practitioner.

The following are all asbestos related diseases:

Mesothelioma

Mesothelioma is an aggressive cancer, which forms in the lining of the lungs any time from 10 to 60 years, after first exposure to asbestos. It can also occur in the peritoneum. The average life expectancy following diagnosis with mesothelioma is about 1 year although significant variations do occur.

Lung Cancer

There are about six different forms of lung cancer. All of them can be caused by exposure to asbestos. Most lung cancer sufferers who were exposed to asbestos also smoked. If you smoked it is important to be aware that the fact that smoking contributed to your cancer does not prevent you bringing a claim in relation to your asbestos exposure. In many cases, it is the combination of smoking and asbestos exposure, which is the cause of lung cancer. So, even if smoking is the main cause of your lung cancer, you may still have an asbestos claim.

Asbestosis

Asbestosis is not cancer. It is a slow onset progressive disease, which affects breathing by hardening and scarring the lung and can be severely debilitating. Sufferers of asbestosis also run a risk of getting asbestos related cancer.

Pleural disease

Pleural disease is not cancer. It is a slow onset progressive disease, which may cause pain and breathlessness because it causes the hardening and constriction of the lining of the lung. This inhibits the capacity of the lungs to expand and contract and can affect people for many years.

Pleural plaques

Pleural plaques are not cancer. They are markings on the lining of the lung that indicate past exposure to asbestos. Pleural plaques can calcify or harden. Depending of their extensiveness and position, pleural plaques can cause some pain and lung restriction. However usually pleural plaques are non-disabling.

Who is at risk?

Asbestos disease can strike anyone. It is unusual for it to strike someone under the age of 30 years, because there is generally a period of fifteen to forty years between exposure to asbestos and the occurrence of disease. No matter how unique the circumstances of your exposure, or even if you don't know how you were exposed, it is likely that you will have some kind of viable claim for compensation.

Proper legal research and advice is critical.

The following main groups of people who have been affected by asbestos disease reflect the history of the use of asbestos.

Miners

This was one of the first groups of workers known to be affected by mesothelioma. The landmark South African study, a study of black miner workers, first identified mesothelioma. In Australia, the incidence of disease afflicting miners at the Wittenoom blue asbestos mine became a focus for the first Australian studies.

Asbestos plant workers

Long before mesothelioma studies were first published (in 1959,) doctors noticed severe and disabling respiratory disease in factory workers who worked using asbestos fibre in the manufacture of cloth, rope and other weaves. Studies highlighting the incidence of such diseases were first published in the early twentieth century.

Handlers and waterside workers

After asbestos was mined out of the ground and milled into fibre, it was transported by rail, truck and ship. It came into contact with rail workers, truck workers and wharfies. Large numbers of these workers have been stricken with asbestos disease as a consequence.

Asbestos factory workers

After asbestos products had been mined, milled and transported, they were made into asbestos cement products at the factories of James Hardie, Wunderlich, Asbestos Products, Bell's Asbestos and Goliath. The majority of products were made by James

Hardie. Many workers who devoted themselves to this work for these companies have paid a terrible price for their work.

Carpenters, plumbers, electricians and builders

After asbestos products left the factories they were used for building in a variety of domestic, commercial and industrial purposes. The various tradesmen who used the product had no inkling that by sawing, rasping or filing the products they were exposing themselves to a toxic dust.

Wives and children of workers

In all these categories of workers, workers would unwittingly take home the toxic dust they had been exposed to. It was on their skin, in their hair and in their clothes. Often the task fell to the worker's wife or children to clean work clothes. In particular, dusty occupations involved beating the overalls with a stick, which liberated large amounts of asbestos dust. Many women and children have suffered fatal exposure to asbestos in this way.

Office workers

Much asbestos was packed into the ceiling spaces of buildings or sprayed onto them as insulation. Over the years it became progressively dislodged as the vibration of the office and the installation, maintenance and renovation of air-conditioning, phone lines and computer equipment, impacted the insulation. Increasing numbers of office workers are reporting asbestos disease as a consequence of this exposure.

Mechanics/brake workers

Several companies including James Hardie and Bendix Mintex made car and truck brake pads, which were impregnated with asbestos. Servicing the pads required them to be machined and drilled and the work area was often then blown clean with high pressure air hoses. This created high levels of airborne asbestos. Many mechanics and brake workers have suffered asbestos disease in this way.

Power plant workers/refinery workers

The use of asbestos to insulate high temperature pipes in power stations and refineries was extremely widespread in Australia over many decades. The toll amongst Australian workers who made the insulation, serviced the pipes and maintained the plants has been extraordinarily high.

Teachers and students

There has been extensive use of AC sheeting in the building of portable and permanent classrooms for schools in Australia. Asbestos dust was liberated when such products were installed serviced, painted, replaced, renovated or vandalised. Teachers, students and maintenance workers have been affected in this way.

Hospital workers

Much asbestos has been used in public hospitals in Australia. Through the use of asbestos in plant rooms for insulating hot pipes and also the use of AC sheeting in a variety of applications, doctors, nurses, patients and hospital maintenance staff have all been exposed to asbestos.

Telstra workers

The Telstra pits, which appear on almost every street corner in Australia, were made with Asbestos cement. Many telephone exchanges were heavily lined with asbestos. Because

of this, many Telstra workers including linesmen, cable jointers, and maintenance workers have suffered asbestos disease.

People at home

Millions of Australian homes contain asbestos.

It can be found in the eaves of roofs, the lining for tiled areas in the bathroom, laundry and kitchen and often in the roof. Many homes, including many beach houses (commonly known as fibro homes) had walls made of AC sheet. Likewise, many houses had garages and sheds made from AC sheeting. Asbestos in the home can be disturbed in a number of ways; principally through renovations (often do-it-yourself) as well as by demolition and by tradesmen such as painters effecting sanding down, pre-painting works. There is an increasing toll of Australians suffering asbestos disease through such exposure.

What to do if you are diagnosed with an asbestos related disease

Mesothelioma - Medical Support

Mesothelioma is a disease that has traditionally been regarded as incurable. However, new techniques and drugs have improved the lot of some mesothelioma sufferers; both in terms of their quality of life and length of life. So it's important that your doctor is aware of all of the latest treatment and care options available for caring for a mesothelioma sufferer.

Your medical advice should encompass surgical and chemotherapy options available to you.

It should also discuss techniques such as photodynamic therapy, and include discussion of new drugs, such as Alimta.

Many doctors now believe that if a mesothelioma is detected early and treated appropriately, significant gains may be made both in terms of length of life and quality of life.

It is important for you to seek as much information as possible from your doctors.

The science of palliative care (pain relief) has also greatly developed in the past several years. There are now many options of palliative care available.

Legal Support

The vast majority of mesothelioma victims in Australia have valuable rights to compensation. Indeed, many have statutory rights to lump sums and other benefits under workers compensation laws. Slater & Gordon has acted for over two and a half thousand mesothelioma sufferers in Australia over the past thirty years and have an unsurpassed record in obtaining compensation for asbestos claimants. Slater & Gordon will act for you on a No Win No Fee™ basis, and your case should ordinarily be resolved within months of first seeing a lawyer.

Asbestosis or pleural disease - Medical Support

Asbestosis and pleural disease are not cancer but they are long term debilitating conditions.

Symptoms of asbestosis and pleural disease can be similar to other respiratory diseases. It is therefore critical that you see a lung specialist and obtain a clear diagnosis if you suspect you have either disease. Both diseases can result in chronic breathlessness and

different treatment options may be available, depending on the cause of your breathing difficulties.

It is important for sufferers of asbestosis and/or pleural disease to have your treatment managed by a doctor who is experienced in the care of such cases. The right application of drugs, nutrition, exercise, and where appropriate, supplied oxygen support can do a great deal to improve quality of life.

Legal Support

The majority of people who suffer from asbestosis or pleural disease have valuable claims for damages. These may vary from medium sized claims to very large claims depending on the severity of the condition. It is important if you are in this situation, to get advice from a lawyer who is experienced in asbestos litigation.

Lung cancer and exposure to asbestos

Most people who get lung cancer for which asbestos exposure is partly to blame never get the compensation they are entitled to.

This is because they wrongly believe that because they smoked, they have no entitlement.

Many doctors and health professionals share this misunderstanding. They think that because the main cause of a person's lung cancer was smoking; they have no claim even if asbestos exposure also made a contribution.

It is important to clear up this misunderstanding.

If you were heavily exposed to asbestos; and you get lung cancer; it is very likely that you have a good and a substantial claim to compensation. The fact that smoking was the main cause doesn't destroy your claim at all. You should see an experienced asbestos lawyer.

Time is of great importance to people who have been diagnosed with mesothelioma, lung cancer, asbestosis, or pleural disease. For this reason you should seek legal advice from an experienced asbestos lawyer immediately.

Counselling and family support is available for all asbestos related diseases

In most Australian States, specific support groups for asbestos related diseases are in operation. Most of these offer counselling and other forms of support and information for asbestos disease sufferers and their families. In Victoria, you should contact the Asbestos Diseases Society of Victoria (ADSVIC) on 1300 659 226. or the Gippsland Asbestos Related Diseases Society (GARDS) on 5127 7744.

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