

Dear Ms Martin

You asked if I had any information on the activities of a so-called Mr Fluffy in Canberra in the 1970's.

Mr Fluffy was a local example of the general ignorance of the use of asbestos and associated public health risks. During the period from the 1940's to the 1970's the basis was laid for an epidemic of asbestos caused diseases and deaths that is perhaps only now beginning to peak.

Raw asbestos fibres were used as insulation in homes in the 1970's. How could such a practice be allowed to occur since it was well documented that there was no safe level of exposure to asbestos dust, that even incidental exposure could result in an incurable cancer? Could such an event occur today?

In 1977 I began a political and publicity campaign to try to alert and inform the Federal and State governments, politicians, the union movement, and the general public of the dangers of the uncontrolled wide spread use of asbestos fibres and products in our community.

The impetus to my involvement was that my father was very ill with asbestosis, and my mother was dying from mesothelioma. In 1978 they both died of these asbestos diseases. X-rays at the time showed that I and my younger brother and two sisters also had been exposed to asbestos dust.

That exposure of my mother and the children was from the asbestos fibres brought into the home on my father's work clothes. Trivial exposure one would have thought; but there had been such incidents reported earlier in the UK.

My father had worked for many years as a lagger, using asbestos as an insulating material. I also worked for eighteen months as a lagger in the mid 1950's.

My father's final years were a constant struggle for breath that was only partially relieved by a tube supplying him with oxygen. My mother's last years were passed in excruciating pain and breathlessness for which there was no relief.

The question I asked then was how our family tragedy could occur when the health hazards of exposure to asbestos had been documented by medical researchers from the mid 1930's onwards? The medical evidence was quite clear. Certainly by the 1950's, irrefutable evidence showed clearly that asbestosis was dose related to asbestos exposure; by the 1960's it was well established that mesothelioma could result from quite trivial exposure to asbestos dust, and the disease could develop at any time after exposure, even forty or more years later.

In 1977 I registered the Asbestos Diseases Society Incorporated to provide me with legitimacy and some legal protection to campaign against the widespread and

indiscriminate use of asbestos. I expected I would encounter fierce opposition by vested interests.

I met with Federal and State politicians, labour unions, and public health officials from 1977 till about 1982 when I had to withdraw due to exhaustion and ill-health.

As a result publicity in the Canberra Times, local radio and television in 1977, I received several letters alerting me to the use of asbestos fibre as insulation in homes in the ACT. I discovered then that my own home in Canberra had asbestos insulation in the ceiling. I subsequently learned that numerous other homes in Canberra and Queanbeyan also had raw brown asbestos in their ceilings.

For some years till 1977, an individual euphemistically called “Mr Fluffy” had been blowing asbestos fibre as insulation into the ceiling cavity of homes in Canberra. An excellent insulation no doubt for the Canberra climate, pity about the long term danger to the families.

Concerned home owners sent me samples of their ceiling insulation. I endeavoured to have these samples tested to confirm that the insulation was indeed asbestos. This proved particularly difficult. For example, the head of the Geology Department of a major university apologetically refused to do any tests. He believed that the department’s involvement would detrimentally affect the future employment prospects of his graduate students. I came across this pernicious influence of the asbestos industry on a number of other occasions.

Meeting in 1978 with the head of ACT Health Services and the ACT Chief Medical Officer revealed that they had known of Mr Fluffy using loose asbestos fibres for some while. They said to me that it was not a problem now as he was no longer working in Canberra. They believed he had moved to the South Coast, the Bateman Bay area. Asked what action they were taking to protect home owners from the asbestos in ceilings, the response was: “there is no danger so long as the asbestos is not disturbed”. I replied that that was a totally unacceptable response to this public health issue. The CMO aggressively replied that “We have more pressing issues to attend to – such as possibly contaminated oysters being sold in the ACT”.

In 1978 onwards I pressed for a national policy on asbestos use. I argued that there needs to be a national register of companies using asbestos in their products, a register also of workers and others who have been exposed to asbestos dust during their employment, or from any other contact with the deadly material. A register also of those who have an asbestos disease. Regretfully I was unsuccessful in having such registers established.

Looking back now to attitudes I encountered during my campaign, radio and TV interviews, submissions to several public enquiries relating to the asbestos industry, meeting with workers and others, I would summarise them as follows:

- Workers exposed to asbestos fibres (in mines, factories, or second-hand exposure such as by electricians, motor mechanics) were unaware of the seriousness of exposure to asbestos dust. Their concern was for employment, for food on the table, their children attending school. The possibility of an asbestos disease lay in the uncertain future.
- Employers were focused on business outcomes, unaware of the risks, or they considered that the workers were adequately compensated for their exposure by being paid penalty rates, so-called “dirt money”, or that the employer is not responsible for the health of the employee.
- Public health officials, State and Federal, were apathetic or ignorant of the public health risk. The reason being that they depended upon, and accepted the technical advice provided by industry representatives. For example, there were industry representatives on sub-committees of the National Health and Medical Research Council. In particular, the NH&MRC cancer register did not list asbestos as a carcinogenic substance in those days. Public Health Officials were too close to industry – they were beguiled by industry advice that asbestos was a benign material with important industrial uses.

Not surprising then that the reaction to my activities was indifference, often overt hostility, accompanied on occasion by threats.

Nevertheless there were individuals in all areas that were willing to consider the medical evidence and to be supportive of me; perhaps they went on to act in their own spheres to try to effect change.

Have attitudes changed over the past forty years? Could a Mr Fluffy operate today?

The news reports I read indicate that there has been definite improvement in the control of asbestos. However the mindsets I encountered in the late 1970's are apparent today in many areas of corporate and public service activities.

The Mr Fluffy attitude seemed to have been prevalent in the implementation of the recent Home Insulation Scheme. He also seems to have been employed by the Commonwealth Bank as financial adviser. Following Hardies example of a decade ago, the Commonwealth Bank today is determined to avoid its corporate responsibilities for the financial devastation its financial advisors have caused. James Hardie had no ethical qualms relocating off-shore to the Netherlands then to the United States, leaving victims with the possibility of little if any financial compensation for the diseases caused to workers and consumers.

There is the Royal Commission into union corruption, and quite rightly too. But where are the Royal Commissions into the devastation caused by rogue corporations, their employees and representatives?

The NSW Dust Diseases Board pays a pittance to workers affected by asbestos. Others contracting an asbestos disease must fight their case in the courts opposed by a cohort of barristers; and if the claimant is unsuccessful, their home and livelihood may be taken to cover legal fees.

I'm reminded of Lang Hancock's comment, Hancock who mined asbestos at Wittenoom and built a fortune doing so: "*A few must suffer for the benefit of others*" - the few sufferers are in fact those hundreds, even thousands, who have, are and will suffer from unimaginable horrors of asbestos diseases. The others are an elite few who are enriched, then and today.

Trevor Francis

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