

WSWS interviews Dr Tony Sasse

Respiratory physician calls for mass screening of asbestos victims

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20 March 2001

The World Socialist Web Site interviewed Dr Tony Sasse, a respiratory physician working in the town of Traralgon in Australia's Latrobe Valley, where diseases associated with asbestos contamination in the Valley's power stations have reached epidemic proportions. Dr Sasse has publicly declared that no higher health risk group exists anywhere in the country and has called for the urgent mass screening of former State Electricity Commission (SEC) employees, who worked in the power stations.

Asbestosis is very much dose related—the more exposure, the more likely you are to get it. You need quite a heavy exposure. The underground miners of asbestos at Wittenoom in particular were the ones most prone to the disease. I've seen a few cases in the Valley, but no really large numbers.

You can get mesothelioma with even a trivial exposure, maybe even a single exposure. No one really knows what the risk is. We do know that in the Latrobe Valley there are a lot of cases. I saw a lady this week with it, aged 72. Her husband used to work in the power station, but it seems likely she got mesothelioma washing the dust out of her husband's overalls.

Thirdly, with lung carcinoma, if you combine cigarette smoking with exposure to asbestos you have up to a 40 percent chance of getting it. It is a very deadly cancer and most patients who catch it are dead within 18 months. Since 10 percent of smokers get it, if you add asbestos to smoking it creates a cumulative effect.

The purpose of mass screening is to try and detect the lung carcinoma. Once it is too late, there is only an 18 month survival rate, with an average 15 percent chance of surviving five years. That is, 85 percent of patients

are dead within five years. If we detect these cancers early, they can be cut out. The five year survival rate skyrockets to 85 percent, so only 15 percent die. That is a tremendous improvement, yet about 80-85 percent of cases present too late for curative measures. So if you put all those facts together, it seems pretty obvious you should detect it early. There is new technology out called High resolution CT scanning, which has only been available in the Valley and around the world for the last few years.

I contacted John Thwaites, who wrote back to me and said they would be happy to look at the proposal for mass screening, and to send it in to the designated bureaucrat. Two months later, the bureaucrat rang me up and said they wouldn't be pursuing the matter.

There is no doubt the state government is partially responsible. Older doctors in the Valley have told me that during the 1970s and 1980s all the cases were sent away to Melbourne, ostensibly to get the best medical care. They suspect the real reason was so that they couldn't get a handle on how many cases there were. As a result they couldn't write a letter to the Medical Journal of Australia outlining the problem, which the doctors at Wittenoom had been able to do.

I've seen so many cases, and so have all the other doctors in the Valley. There is only one word to describe this, and that is an epidemic. For so many reasons the state government has been unaware or uninterested. We don't even know how many cases there have been. We don't even know the fundamentals of what Steve Plunkett has called the greatest industrial disaster in Australia. We don't even know how many have died, we don't know how many we can expect to die. There is an enormous lack of fundamental data.

You have to have that data, and it is definitely the responsibility of the government of the day to get it. I know they won't. There are skeletons buried by previous governments.

It is ironic that it is a Labor government that is now having to deal with this. I do know that there is a large groundswell of local interest in the matter. Of course it always has been there, but I think that now it is getting organised at a political level. You might find that if the Bracks Labor government fails to make a real effort on this issue, that there will be a candidate, a labor-based person, running on this platform. We're starting to get a few big sticks out there.

So many people have died, so many people are still affected as well. Nobody in the Valley is unaware of this, everybody has been touched. Either one's family, one's neighbours or one's friends—everyone has been touched. You can't hide this. It is an historical inevitability that there will be some sort of statistical inquiry, or some sort of gathering of data. But I'm a doctor. My job is to try to raise support to prevent further damage, if I can. That is why I am calling for a mass screening program.



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