

From the Editor . . .

This issue is devoted to a range of asbestos-related topics. Two of the scientific papers highlight the ongoing problem of environmental asbestos exposure, despite the banning of asbestos in 2008. We are pleased to announce, albeit belatedly, that in April Dr Sophia Kisting was awarded the President of Convocation Medal at the University of Cape Town (UCT). Dr Kisting is a health activist and current Executive Director of the National Institute for Occupational Health (NIOH). In the early years of the Asbestos Relief Trust she represented claimants on the Board of Trustees. She currently chairs the Q(h)ubeka Trust which disburses compensation to mine-workers with silicosis and silico-tuberculosis, following an out-of-court settlement between the miners and two major gold-mining companies.¹

We have a tribute to Prof. Jock McCulloch whose books and papers on asbestos and gold mining in South Africa are a must-read for anyone wishing to understand the devastating health and social impacts of asbestos and silica-related diseases. We also have a report on the NIOH Remembrance Day Commemoration which was held to honour many colleagues who worked in occupational health and have passed on. The Asbestos and Kgalagadi Relief Trusts with the NIOH announce the upcoming launch of the Piroshaw Camay Virtual Asbestos Library in memory of PC.

One of the first and most highly cited studies that 'convincingly' described the relationship between pleural mesothelioma and asbestos were published by Wagner, Sleggs and Marchard in South Africa in 1960.² Fifty years later both the mining and use of asbestos were finally banned in this country. Consequently, we are left with a legacy of many tons of asbestos-containing products. Gaby Mizan and colleagues at the NIOH measured asbestos fibres before and after the removal and replacement of asbestos-cement roofs in two townships in Tshwane. No asbestos fibres were detected in the small sample studied. The study reinforces the importance of adhering to stringent procedures to



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minimise asbestos exposure when removing asbestos-cement roofs.

In a larger study, Vorster et al. from the NIOH reviewed data emanating from a service that analyses bulk samples and air filters for asbestos fibres. Asbestos was found mainly in cement products, vinyl floor tiles and cement roofs. The recent upsurge of specimens from schools is associated with concerns regarding health risks to learners and educators.

Both studies demonstrate the continued asbestos-related public health risks faced by communities. In addition, they show how analysis of routinely collected data can provide important information for action.

As we continue to battle old foes, new foes are emerging. Although power plant workers are also at risk of exposure to asbestos, the third paper in this issue looks at lifestyle risk factors for non-communicable diseases in power plant workers. A third of the workers had moderate-to-high 10-year cardiovascular disease risk, and high prevalence of both behavioural and physical risk factors. Effective workplace interventions are needed to reduce risk. We must not forget that many occupational diseases are also classified as NCDs.

I hope that this issue will inspire us to continue to work to protect the health of workers.

N Ndlovu

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Letter to the Editor

I would like to share some wonderful news. From 1984 to 1998, I spent time in Mafefe in Limpopo, where I conducted research for my PhD.¹ The tarring of the roads was the main recommendation of my thesis all those years ago, and this has finally happened. In May this year, it was reported that "In the hope that it would bring an end to the amount of deadly asbestos dust on their streets, residents of former asbestos-mining community Mafefe, have welcomed the construction of part of a road in the town at the cost of R43M".² The road to be tarred is an 8 km-stretch of Mafefe's main street. It is good to know that the complaints from the locals about the harmful effects of asbestos, over the last few decades, have reached the ears of those who can, and are willing to, act. The main advocate against asbestos in the town is Matime Mabeitja. Together, since 1984 Matime and I took on the task of creating awareness around the hazards of asbestos, and it is wonderful to know that Matime has clearly continued to lobby for improved conditions in Mafefe. Another campaigner who deserves a special mention for the role he played is William Tshabalala, who created the asbestos museum outside Mathabatha – a reminder of how we need to keep the story alive so that those affected have recourse to justice.

We all played our part in keeping the issue of asbestos alive – Leah Roodt and Engela Venter from the (now) National Institute for Occupational Health braved the journey to and from Mafefe, and developed trust with the Mafefe community; the Mafefe Asbestos Health Workers Committee worked tirelessly in collecting data and educating their community about the hazards of asbestos: Prof. Tony Davies and his wife, Diedre, brought money into that community through organising compensation for all those miners with asbestos-related diseases; Jill Murray contributed to diagnosing those

with disease and Prof. Albert Solomon shared his radiological knowledge. Many others must also be acknowledged: HIVOS and the AF Leger Trust for funding the field work; Gill Nelson for her epidemiological expertise; Tony Cantrell for keeping the story alive through the Diploma of Occupational Health lectures; Phillip van Niekerk, Carolyn Dempster and Steven Friedman for writing excellent articles that kept the story of asbestos alive in the *Rand Daily Mail* and *The Star newspapers* for almost a year; Paul Davies for giving me a platform at a Wits alumni event; and, of course, Barry Castleman for speaking at the Wits Medical School in 1983 about the hazards of asbestos, galvanising myself and Jean-Patrick Leger to do something about the hidden epidemic in Mafefe.

Let us remember Derek Rendall, Jock McCulloch, Dr Sluis-Cremer, Joas Khubai, and two people from the Mafefe Asbestos Health Workers Committee, Type Phiri and William Tshabalala, who worked to highlight the health hazards of asbestos. Sadly, they all died of an asbestos-related disease.

Dr MA Felix

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