

# Asbestos flooding B.C. with a 'steady stream of death'

BY ETHAN BARON, VANCOUVER PROVINCE    SEPTEMBER 5, 2010



Dirk Jansema has mesothelioma, a terminal disease caused by his exposure to asbestos in the workplace years ago.

**Photograph by:** James Clarke, The Province

Death's first whisper came to Dirk Jansema while he was singing in his church choir.

The electrician from Qualicum Beach on Vancouver Island had always been fit and healthy, his Sunday-morning voice kept strong by lung-boosting day-long hikes and hours of mountain biking.

But on that day four years ago as he stood in the choir and sang, he found himself short of breath. He thought he must be getting old.

The truth turned out far worse: He was feeling the first symptoms of a disease caused by exposure to asbestos — a mineral that takes decades in the body to do its killing work.

Soon, Jansema was huffing oxygen off a welder's tank just to get himself through the workday.

Now, 61 and suffering from final-stage mesothelioma, Jansema has been told he has, at most, 18 months to live. He had spent his working life in pulp mills and other industrial sites, and remembers employers' attitude toward asbestos ran along the lines of "You'll be fine, don't worry about it, you'll be safe."

Although health officials began to recognize the dangers of asbestos in the mid-1970s and the

insulating, fire-resistant product was largely phased out of use in Canada by the '90s, diseases related to asbestos exposure have become the leading cause of workplace death in B.C., according to the provincial workers'-compensation agency.

"You get ripped off of your life," Jansema says. "It wasn't self-inflicted. Somebody else did this to me."

And while older workers have begun dying in droves from long-ago exposure to asbestos, the substance — found in many pre-1980 homes and in imported vehicle brake linings — still poses a lethal threat.

WorkSafe BC documents some 50 asbestos-related workplace deaths annually, but the true toll is far higher, as agency statistics only cover workers who have filed compensation claims.

"Among B.C. workers alone, it is estimated that 1,500 workers will die from asbestos-caused disease over the next five years," says a 2008 report from the Rideau Institute in Ottawa. "And it is known that many cases of asbestos-caused disease are not recognized as such and not captured in the figures."

A University of B.C. study of health records and workers'-compensation data from 1992 to 2004 found that only 23 per cent of victims of asbestosis — one of several diseases caused by asbestos exposure — filed provincial workers'-compensation claims. Less than half of all B.C. cases of mesothelioma — a terminal asbestos-caused cancer of the linings of the chest or abdominal cavities — are compensated by WorkSafe BC, UBC researchers also found.

"It's a steady stream of death," says Larry Stoffman, who chaired for eight years a Health Canada committee on asbestos. "There are cases where people have only been exposed for one day and they ended up with mesothelioma 30 years later."

Electricians such as Jansema make up eight per cent of WorkSafe BC's asbestos-disease claimants. Metal workers and mechanics account for 21 per cent of cases, mainly because of heavy use of asbestos for insulation in metalworks and shipbuilding decades ago. Plumbers and fitters, carpenters, painters, insulators and drywallers also had high rates of exposure.

In spite of strict controls over asbestos use and removal, the threat for many workers remains severe.

Because getting rid of asbestos is so costly, some unscrupulous contractors, particularly in the demolition business, allow workers to handle asbestos without required safeguards such as respirators and sealed work spaces, Stoffman says.

And imported vehicle brake linings can pose a danger to mechanics, Stoffman says. "A lot of stuff coming from offshore isn't labelled at all," he says. "It's full of asbestos."

As with Jansema, Dave Ford's first symptom of asbestos-caused disease was breathing trouble.

A doctor diagnosed mesothelioma in June 2007, when Ford, 69, of Powell River, B.C., and his wife were just embarking on their dream retirement. "They were going to build a family home, start RVing," says Ford's daughter Tracy. "They planned to spend their summers on an island off Powell River."

Doctors in B.C. told Ford, a former pulp mill electrician, that "there was nothing they could do for him," says Tracy, 41.

Ford was suffering extreme pain, but preferred lucidity to the haze of narcotic painkillers, she says.

"I kept trying to tell him if you take more pain medication, you won't have to go through this excruciating experience," she says. "It was really tough on all of us."

Desperate, the family flew Ford to San Francisco, where a surgeon cut out his cancerous lung lining. Still, sixteen months after he was diagnosed, Ford was dead.

Tracy founded the AREA Fund ([www.areafund.ca](http://www.areafund.ca)) with her mother Lesley in March to raise money for asbestos research and education initiatives.

Kurt Hilger may or may not have a deadly time bomb in his body. At age 14, he followed his father into work at the Cassiar asbestos mine in northern B.C.

Dust from the mine and its two huge tailings piles was "all over the place," Hilger remembers. "Mum would have to check to see which way the wind was blowing before she put the laundry out."

His father Hartmut died painfully three years ago from mesothelioma, prompting Hilger to look into his own risk.

"My family doctor said, 'If you got it, there's not a lot you can do. So get used to it,'" says Hilger, 62, a B.C. Hydro electrician from the Slocan Valley near Nelson, B.C.

In Trail, B.C., United Steelworkers officials began noticing several years ago that many workers who had retired from the Teck (formerly Cominco) zinc and lead smelting plant were coming down with asbestos-caused diseases.

They called a town meeting. About 80 victims and family members showed up. At the next meeting, 130 came. Now, the union has identified nearly 100 victims, people who toiled in the smelter from the late '40s to late '70s.

"I've seen first-hand what some of these people go through, and their families go through, and their grandchildren, and it's just horrible," says United Steelworkers Local 480 president Doug Jones.

"Somewhere along the way somebody has to be accountable for that. Someone has to be responsible for the shortened lives that people live and the pain and suffering that all the families go through. It just doesn't seem fair."

Teck spokesman Richard Deane says the company spends up to \$2 million a year removing asbestos from its plant. "Ever since the negative health effects of asbestos were known we've been working diligently to remove and deal with any trace of asbestos," Deane says, adding that the company's responsibility to sickened workers is covered by its contributions to WorkSafe.

Eno Bulfone died an asbestos related death at 70, angry that there would be no compensation for him or his family, says his widow Loretta, 68.

In 2002, the provincial Liberals passed legislation that meant workers filing WorkSafe BC claims after turning 65 would no longer receive government compensation beyond treatment and rehabilitation.

"They're not compensating people who are dying from a workplace disease," Loretta says. "There is no fairness in that."

Victims and their families can join class-action suits to access money in trust funds set up by U.S. asbestos manufacturers. Or they can file a WorkSafe BC claim, and have the agency act for them in such lawsuits, as well as provide any WorkSafe benefits for which the victim or family is eligible.

Filing a claim requires giving up the right to sue independently.

Local 480 officials advise members to take the WorkSafe route, Jones says, because independent lawsuits may prove fruitless.

"Often times, a lot of the (trust) money is eaten up in fighting the thing," Jones says.

WorkSafe could not provide a figure for the amount claimants usually get from the trust funds, but agency lawyer Gerald Massing says it's usually less than \$100,000 and could be as little as \$5,000.

For asbestos victims and their families, the onset of disease hurls them into a traumatic and confusing world. Doctors may not know a patient has been exposed to asbestos, or the symptoms may not point directly to asbestos-related disease, leading to improper diagnosis, says Dr. Christopher Lee, an asbestos-disease specialist at the B.C. Cancer Agency.

"That could be a miss on the doctor's part, but might also be an issue of denial on the patient's part," Lee says.

Once a victim is correctly diagnosed, families struggle to provide care and access resources, says Bob Katzko, whose father Michael died of mesothelioma from serving in the Canadian Navy for two years on ships during the Second World War.

"I'm not sure the medical profession is quite up to snuff on mesothelioma," Katzko says. "My dad was sent home and the family wasn't told anything. We had to learn how to take care of him, really not understanding the progression the disease would take.

"My father was basically strangled. The cancer started in his left lung and made its way up into his throat."

Katzko's difficulties led him and his partner Sheryl Thompson to establish the Canadian Society for Asbestos Victims ([www.cansav.ca](http://www.cansav.ca)), a clearing house of information to help victims and their families.

While industrial and military exposures are mostly a thing of the past, asbestos remains a present-day menace to many B.C. workers, and to residents of older homes.

Contractors and do-it-yourselfers are removing asbestos without proper precautions, out of ignorance or a desire to cut costs, says Al Johnson, WorkSafe BC's chief of construction-regulation enforcement.

"On a fairly regular basis we get a call that somebody's demolishing a building or doing a renovation and there are no precautions at all."

Floor tiles, drywall, insulation, stippled-texture coatings and even some caulks can contain asbestos, which may be released when the material is moved, broken or cut.

"It's invisible in the air. You can't taste it, smell it."

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