



[www.safetyline.wa.gov.au/institute](http://www.safetyline.wa.gov.au/institute)

## ***Work Health and Safety***

### **Asbestos: The Wittenoom Tragedy**

Reflections from Dr Jim McNulty, former Commissioner for Health

#### **BACKGROUND**

Asbestos mining operations at Wittenoom led to serious health problems for workers at the mine and residents in the town, as well as those transporting the raw asbestos in trucks and ships, workers producing asbestos products, and those installing, using and removing asbestos.

Dr Jim McNulty has an unparalleled insight into the tragic history of the Wittenoom asbestos mine from the perspective of his roles as mines medical officer, occupational physician in the occupational health branch of the Health Department and as Commissioner for Health.

In 1985, the occupational health branch of the Health Department was amalgamated with the factories and shops inspectorate to form WorkSafe. This film of Dr McNulty's reflections about the Wittenoom asbestos tragedy has been produced by WorkSafe to record the oral history of workplace health and safety in WA, as part of a Public Sector Commission oral history series.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Wittenoom, located around 1,100 km northeast of Perth, the small Australian town now lies all but empty with only a handful of residents remaining. During the 1950s Wittenoom was known as the Pilbara region's largest town, a monument of prosperity. But today, it is a ghost town.

The town was originally constructed to support the local mine. From 1950 until the early 1960s Wittenoom was Australia's only supplier of asbestos with around 161,000 tons being mined. During that time, approximately 20,000 people lived and worked in the town. Asbestos mining at Wittenoom was the greatest occupational health and safety tragedy in Australia - comparable to the Chernobyl and Bhopal catastrophes.

Wittenoom was shut down in 1966 with a dreadful legacy of asbestosis and mesothelioma for the 20,000 men, women and children who lived and worked there. Sadly, a great many more people will continue to die or become disabled by asbestos related diseases across Australia before the epidemic finally peaks. By 2020 the total deaths Australia wide due to asbestosis is estimated to climb as high as 45,000 with several thousand of these being attributed to exposure to Wittenoom alone.

The man most credited with exposing the health risks from asbestos mining at Wittenoom is Dr Jim McNulty. We visited Jim in his home in Perth to try to better understand the events of the Wittenoom tragedy.

## **JIM EXPLAINS HOW HE GOT TO WITTENOOM.**

I was working in England in TB as a chest physician in Stoke-on-Trent and Stoke-on-Trent had a lot of dust disease both from the coal mining industry and the pottery industry, so I had a fair bit of experience in people coming in with dust disease – silicosis or coal miners' pneumoconiosis or whatever, as well as TB. Then I had a ring from a Doctor who I had worked for in South Wales and he said that he had been asked to find someone to go to Kalgoorlie who was experienced in dust diseases and TB.

So in Kalgoorlie I was a chest Physician and became Medical Superintendent of the Kalgoorlie Hospital and while I was there I had a mobile x-ray unit that returned from a normal tour to Wittenoom and brought back x-rays from the asbestos miners there and that showed a very considerable degree of lung disease due to asbestos, and it was so bad in fact that there were x-ray changes due to asbestos in lungs of miners who had only worked there for two years, which would be quite incredible by any occupational health standard.

Anyhow, I went to Wittenoom myself and was horrified by the conditions that I found.

## **JIM'S FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF WITTENOOM**

The whole town was laid with asbestos tailings as road surfacing, when you stepped off the plane there was a flurry of dust which contained asbestos fibres. We drove up in the car to the pub to stay the night and as the car stopped the dust became airborne and you could feel the dust in your teeth almost, so every vehicle movement, as it was later in the town, stirred up dust which contained asbestos fibres.

At Wittenoom you didn't have to work in the mine to develop dust disease because of the extensive use of the tailings around the town site, so that mine managers and the managerial staff were often affected, as particularly sadly so were the children.

The entrance to the mine was half way up a cliff, hill, face. And the dust was very bad all throughout the mine. What was a very bad feature, particularly bad feature, was the dust extraction scheme.

The dust extraction system removed some of the dust and discharged it above roof level but it flowed back to the mill and staff offices. The dust was also discharged at the same level as the main entrance to the underground mine. So the air entering the mine already contained dust.

Even when the expensive extractor was working properly, it merely took the dust out of the mill and dumped it on the lawns. Making it more dangerous outside than inside the mill.

That actually is what's called the old Colonial Mill, it was an old Mill they had, which was only used sometimes when they were put under pressure and that was just horrendous, dust everywhere, and the first crushings took place there and the ore was gradually crushed more and more it is came down towards the bottom of the mine where it came out as fibre.

And there was a bagging plant down at the bottom where it was put into bags, bit of a shute into bags. The bags were hessian bags, so if you can imagine lifting a hessian bag which is full of fine dust and putting it over your shoulder, I mean the dust is outside the bags, its there, you can find the same thing down at the wharf at Fremantle when they are loading up the ships, dropped from the top of the hold down to the level and you see the dust rising everywhere.

The new mill was an improvement because there was more water on it but water was scarce and also there was a tendency not to wet the ore too much. Wet ore was unacceptable to the international...people who wanted the ore, ...so it tended to be just a sprinkle, so it was still pretty dry when it came out of the mill.

## WHAT JIM FOUND & SAID TO MANAGEMENT

What I later came to understand was that there were hurdles in regard to prevention. First of all that the water supply was poor so they could not sort of drench it as you may like ....that money was short and that it was not a very successful operation. That the mines inspectorate, who were willing and wanted to do something, were largely ineffective and that the dust sampling techniques they were using were ineffective and as you know yourself that .. If you are going to resolve a problem you have got to identify what the causes are, and answer your problem.. and then tackle that. And dust control was the primary thing.

The mine consisted of a number of stopes and a milling operation. Working conditions inside the mine were poor, dust particles were visible in the air and in some cases were so thick they reduced visibility. The underground was humid and poorly ventilated. The miners worked in a cramped, stooped position as the stopes were low, sometimes as low as about a metre. And the miners' constant use of hand held tools in these conditions often caused Raynaud's syndrome, resulting in pain and numbness of the hand.

Employees worked continuously amongst the asbestos dust in the poorly ventilated mine and mill. Sometimes wearing respirators which were ineffective and believed by Jim and the other visitors to be largely for show.

You couldn't sneak into Wittenoom, in the sense that... but you could by road I suppose.. but 'Mickey Mouse' airlines, the airline that flew us up, they were largely sponsored by Colonial Sugar refinery who [ran] the blue asbestos [mine]. And they knew everyone who was coming to the mine and they knew when I was going to the mine and I'll like to say that they dressed the whole place up, cleaned it up, when I was going there, but they certainly tried to make it not as bad as it was.

Between 1957 and 1962 Jim repeatedly warned the company's manager of the dangers to the miners and the people living in the town. Mine management took no significant action.

The top brass to Colonial Sugar Refinery who ran the mine came to see me and they... I can still remember... excuse my language but they said all this fuss about dust is bull dust isn't it? I tried to tell them about the amount of disease that I've already found in the miners after such relatively short exposures which were a scandal by any standard.

Attempts to get changes made to dust measurement particularly were blocked by people who had done the same thing for many years. They couldn't appreciate that you couldn't measure asbestos with this sampler because the asbestos clogged up the orifice, the fibres clogged the orifice up, and therefore you couldn't get a proper sample. The actual one we used to use... did show the fibres properly and we used that and the first dust sampling that took place then at the mine by the mines inspector and by myself were

hideous, they had a crude level of 300 particles per cubic cm or something and the dust levels just came back at 1,000 plus and that was everything you know, silica, fibre, whatever, with the additional trouble that the fibre tended to block the orifice and therefore you were not getting a true sample anyway. So all you could really say it was that it was too dusty.

## **JIM'S CONCLUSIONS**

The 1959 Annual Report of the Public Health Department expressed particular concern about the numbers of Wittenoom men affected by asbestosis and their relatively young age and the extremely short dust exposures. Unfortunately, the Public Health Department did not have the power to order the company to close down the mine. That was responsibility of the Mines Department.

It's difficult to understand why the mine and mill were allowed to operate without adequate risk control measures. And why nothing was done to force the company to clean them up, adopt safer work practices, or close down their operation.

It was a tragedy and should not have been allowed to develop as it did, but I recognise the needs for development in Western Australia at that time. I recognise too the lack of awareness of the scale of the problems which was partly due to deliberate blindness, closing your mind to it, partly due to the isolation and how far away it was, I mean it might have well been in Timbuktu if you like as Wittenoom as far as people in Perth were concerned. The lack of feedback from it because most of the workforce were migrants off ships with very little English and who were sent up there and who wept unseen if you like, unheard. And the whole climate in Western Australia at the time was pro-development against anything which inhibited that. That about sums it up really. The Governments did not want to be aware of problems, so they were inclined to close their eyes and close their ears to problems.

## **FINAL OUTCOMES**

1988 saw the first victories in court for Wittenoom mesothelioma victims. The Judge ruled that CSR acted with continuous, conscious and contumelious disregard for its workers' safety. CSR acknowledged liability for asbestos related disease at Wittenoom.

On June 30, 2006 the Government shut down the power grid to Wittenoom and the majority of the residents have relocated. The town now stands as a stark reminder of the dangers of choosing progress over safety, and of the many unheeded warnings. If we have learned anything from Wittenoom only time will tell.