

Cancer Cause

What's most likely to kill you at work? An accident? An infection? Wrong. Worldwide, cancer is the single biggest cause of work-related deaths, claiming one life every 52 seconds.

BY RORY O'NEILL

You don't expect work in a chocolate factory to be deadly. But it killed William Webster. He spent 28 years employed as an electrician at the Cadbury's plant in Somerdale, England. His death from the cancer mesothelioma, caused by exposure to asbestos used as lagging on pipes and boilers, came in August 2005, aged 80.

Although William lived a long life –he should have lived a longer life and he should have had a better death. As in this case, most occupational cancers strike retired workers because of the time-lag between exposures and development of disease.

James Davies, a solicitor acting for Mr Webster's family and provided by William's union, Amicus, said, "Before his death, Mr Webster was an active, physical man. During the last six months of his life he was in a lot of pain and was unable to play any golf or drive a car. Prior to this he had been very independent and very healthy." He added, "Sadly, it appears that he has become the latest innocent victim of mesothelioma - a tragic illness which is caused by the negligence of employers like Cadbury."

A January 2007 report from the International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimated the global toll from

occupational cancer to be 609,000 deaths each year. This puts occupational cancer at the top of the work-related deaths league table, causing almost a third of all occupational fatalities, and nearly double the number of deaths worldwide attributed to occupational accidents.

Asbestos is the biggest single industrial killer, but is probably only responsible for in the region of one in six of all occupational cancer deaths. There's every indication the problem – an occupational cancer epidemic – is increasing. And now cases are also emerging in younger workers in unexpected jobs.

Deadly emissions, deadly omissions

"Despite being the single largest cause of work-related deaths, occupational cancer risks have been downplayed in a display of criminal neglect by governments, health and safety enforcement agencies and employers," says IMF health and safety director Rob Johnston. "The end result has been a wholly preventable epidemic of cancers."

Johnston says the most commonly cited figure for the proportion of cancers caused by work – four per cent – has seen the problem dismissed in prevention priorities. "The only problem with this figure, which is quoted by

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IMF's occupational cancer awareness campaign banner

governments worldwide as fact, is that it is blatantly nonsense.” The four per cent figure is based on a single study written over a quarter of a century ago and based only on industrial workplaces in the U.S. It concluded “lifestyle” factors like smoking and diet were the root cause of the great majority of cancers.

“The lead author on that study, Sir Richard Doll, was receiving substantial and undeclared payments from chemical companies and the U.S. chemical industry trade body,” says Johnston. “The study missed most causes of cancer, ignored risks to women, discounted risks in many industries, excluded African-American workers and did not count cancers in workers aged over 65, at a stroke ruling out the great majority of work-related cancers.”

He says the ILO’s “cautious” estimate would put the real proportion of cancers linked to workplace factors at one in every ten cases. “Our investigations suggest at least eight per cent and possibly more than 16 per cent of all cancers are the result of preventable exposures at work.”

World renowned occupational cancer expert Dr Samuel Epstein agrees. An emeritus professor of environmental and occupational medicine at the University of Illinois in Chicago and the founder of the Cancer Prevention Coalition, Epstein says “based on minimal estimates” work exposures are responsible for ten per cent of overall cancer mortality, with much higher rates in some jobs.

He added, “Lifestyle academics have consciously or unconsciously become the well-touted and enthusiastic mouthpiece for industry interests, urging regulatory inaction and public complacency.”

Whole categories of cancers are being missed, says Professor Andy Watterson of the occupational and environmental health research group at Stirling University, Scotland. “Lung cancers caused by asbestos exposure are not picked up and other occupational cancers simply do not show up on the official radar; the contribution of work to breast cancers is widely neglected and there are a number of carcinogens that attack humans – brain, nervous system, soft tissue sarcomas, cancer of the larynx, kidneys, stomach, bone – which are not adequately regulated.”

Cancer campaigns

In Canada, Bud Jimmerfield’s family and colleagues know the human cost of this failure to recognise and address a workplace epidemic. After an 18-month fight, the husband and father of eight died on January 31, 1998 from cancer of the oesophagus. The disease was caused by inhaling machine oils during 31 years working in a car parts factory in southern Ontario. He was 49.

Addressing a union meeting barely a month before his death, he said, “If I look back at it, if I ask, would I rather



Bud and Diane Jimmerfield

PHOTO: CAW

have my life back than a dollar, I’d rather have my life back.”

Bud, though, left a legacy. A Canadian autoworkers’ union (CAW) local president and long-time health and safety activist, he was instrumental in the launch of the union’s high profile and on-going national ‘Prevent Cancer Campaign’.

“Bud was the catalyst for our Prevent Cancer Campaign,” explains Sari Sairanen, the union’s national health, safety and environment director, adding, “We wanted to start discussions amongst our membership that cancer it is not strictly a lifestyle issue but could be related to workplace exposures.”

Over the last decade the union has produced detailed materials for use by local union representatives and has run several cancer prevention conferences. CAW’s ‘Devil of a poison’ pamphlet was distributed to 80,000 concerned citizens.

But the most telling changes have come in improvements negotiated in Canadian workplaces. A mix of training, campaigning and collective bargaining has seen a dramatic reduction in exposures to carcinogens – cancer

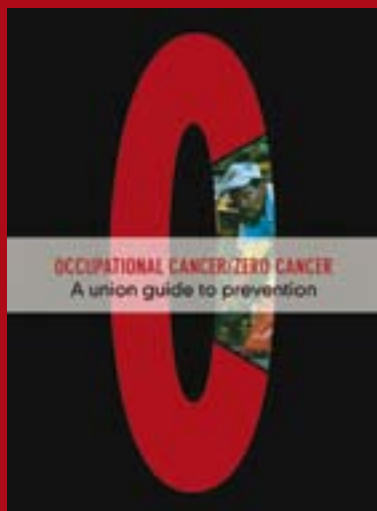


CAW campaign badge

KEY WORK CANCER FACTS

- Occupational cancer is the top work killer worldwide, ahead of all other work-related diseases and work accidents.
- Over 600,000 workers die of occupational cancers every year, according to the ILO – that’s one death every 52 seconds. The true toll is almost certainly higher.
- More than one in five workers faces a cancer risk from their work.
- Between eight and 16 per cent of all cancers are the result of exposures at work.
- Almost 100,000 chemicals are used in workplaces worldwide. Barely one in a 100 has been thoroughly tested for health risks.
- Over 50 substances are rated by the United Nations’ International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) as a definite or probable cancer risk at work. Over 100 more are IARC rated as a possible cancer risk.
- Most causes of cancer were identified in studies of workers.
- It is not just industrial workers that are at risk. Hairdressers, teachers, nurses, doctors, farm and office workers and workers in many other jobs have also died of occupational cancers.
- Tens of thousands of workers generally have to die before scientific studies identify a workplace cancer problem. A precautionary approach is always the safe and healthy option.

More information about occupational cancer and its prevention can be found in *Occupational Cancer/Zero Cancer: A trade union guide to prevention*, a new global union publication being released for activities on April 28, 2007 and on the IMF website at: www.imfmetal.org/cancer



causing substances – in workplaces covering in total more than 100,000 CAW members.

“The Cancer Prevention Campaign brought together for the first time the union’s health and safety, environmental and compensation activists,” explains Sairanen. “Between them they were encouraged to: identify cancer-causing exposures in the workplace; insist the potential cancer cause be removed and substituted with less hazardous substances, or at an absolute minimum insist the process be enclosed; file compensation claims for all workers who may have work-related cancers; and ensure community support by making sure the public knows about air emissions and hazardous waste from workplaces which may cause cancer.”

The most important aspect of the CAW Prevent Cancer Campaign has been pollution prevention, she says. “If we can eliminate carcinogens from our workplaces and replace them with less hazardous substances, then we can both prevent the incredible incidence of cancer among blue-collar workers and among their family members - since they won’t be bringing carcinogens home on their work clothes - their neighbours and others in our communities and among the animals and plants exposed to these same carcinogens.”

CAW has had some startling successes, including negotiating wide-ranging bans on cancer-causing substances in Canada’s car plants. “In addition to the contract language that we negotiated with Ford, Chrysler and GM to remove all of the carcinogens, a number of small workplaces have negotiated better language,” Sairanen says.

Global problem, global solution

In South Africa, metalworkers’ union Numsa has faced its own occupational disease fight. “In steel companies, fettlers – the workers who use chipping hammers to remove excessive metal from castings – die on average two years after retirement,” says Numsa international officer Hlokoza Motau, adding members exposed to vanadium complain of problems including lung cancer. “We know the jobs are deadly, but the companies blame HIV/AIDS,” Motau says.

Many of Numsa’s members work for multinationals, like BHP-Billiton and Anglo-American, processing metals including manganese, chromium, iron and vanadium.

Numsa has linked up with CAW to develop health and safety training for its union reps and to introduce innovative approaches in the workplace. “We have pioneered the right to refuse dangerous work,” says Motau. “And we have managed to set up committees composed of both management and shop stewards to look into occupational diseases and deaths attributed to manganese, chrome, vanadium and other toxic substances. Numsa is involved in developing joint training for health and safety reps.”

The problems extend beyond traditional industrial

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OCCUPATIONAL CANCER

workplaces. In the UK, Rebecca Little, a nurse, died aged 53 of cancer caused by her job. Her union, Amicus, fought to prove her death from the cancer mesothelioma was caused by exposure in the 1960s to the asbestos that insulated pipes in a London hospital. The Department of Health eventually admitted liability. In August 2005, her husband, Dr Julian Little, was awarded £175,000 (US\$340,000) in compensation, in a case run with legal support from Amicus.

Amicus national officer Gail Cartmail commented, “We would advise anyone who is concerned about symptoms such as breathlessness or chest pains to consult their doctor. Amicus members who are worried that they may have been exposed to asbestos at work can add their names to an Amicus database that registers details of buildings with a confirmed presence of asbestos.”

Cartmail highlights another major challenge facing unions. Two working generations – some in work, some retired - have already faced exposure to a workplace cancer risk, and could go on to develop the disease. Nothing can compensate individuals and families for that eventuality, but compensation may be the closest to justice they can get.

This year James Hardie Industries, a multinational that was once Australia’s largest asbestos company which had resisted finalising an asbestos compensation deal, finally put pen to paper after a six-year, high profile trade union campaign. In February 2007, the company signed the



Julian and Rebecca Little



Numsa organiser Shadrock Simelane (right) reads a memo to management demanding a healthy and safe workplace at Transvaal Galvanisers in South Africa
PHOTO: Numsa

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AUS\$4bn (US\$3.1bn) 40-year deal. It will make an initial payment of around AUS\$185 million (US\$144m) into an Asbestos Injuries Compensation Fund, with further regular payments to be made over the life of the agreement.

Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union (AMWU) New South Wales state secretary Paul Bastian, whose union was prominent in the campaign, welcomed the agreement. He said, "The deal will ensure current and future victims of James Hardie asbestos products are properly compensated."

Boycotts of James Hardie products and protests in Australia, the Netherlands and the U.S., with the support of unions worldwide, were just some of the activities that eventually forced the company to the negotiating table.

IMF's Rob Johnston says addressing the workplace cancer issue takes a combination of awareness-raising and company-wide and workplace level action. "Trained, informed and properly supported union reps are the key to identifying and remedying problems at work," he says.

"And we need to make sure official safety agencies clampdown on those employers who expose workers to risks. At the moment many are allowing companies to get away with murder."



James Hardie campaign rally in 2004

PHOTO: AMWU



PREVENTING OCCUPATIONAL CANCER

Occupational Cancer/Zero Cancer: A union guide to prevention addresses the growing epidemic of occupational cancer and outlines steps unions can take to protect workers in the workplace.

"At least 1 in every 10 cancers - probably many more - is the result of preventable, predictable workplace exposure," the report states. "More people today, face a workplace cancer risk than at any other time in history. It's just that most of them don't know it." The guide provides practical advice on what workers and unions can do to identify and reduce the risk of exposure to cancer causing substances.

The Zero Cancer awareness campaign launches on April 28 in honour of International Workers' Memorial Day. A campaign poster (pictured left) is included

in this edition of Metal World. Copies of the guide will be sent out to affiliates and are available in English, French, Spanish and Russian. The publication is also available on the IMF website.

The report has been prepared by the IMF with the support of all of the Global Union Federations and the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC). For more information about the Zero Cancer campaign or occupational cancer, go to: www.imfmetal.org/cancer