

## BOOK REVIEW

**Lenore Layman and Gail Phillips**, Editors, *Asbestos in Australia: From boom to dust* Monash University Publishing, Clayton, Victoria, 2019 pp. 346. ISBN: 9781925835618 (paperback); ISBN: 9781925835595 (pdf); ISBN: 9781925835601(epub).

This book is a comprehensive story of asbestos and its legacy. The stated aim of the editors ‘we intend this book to provide such a perspective, enabling a better understanding of how and why this health and environmental disaster happened’, provides a context for Australia through studies quoted from research in South Africa, US and UK. This is presented in six parts and a total of 18 chapters. Individual authors of these chapters are from a range of backgrounds and differing areas of expertise – medical practitioners, journalists, lawyers, social historians and individuals or family members who have experienced firsthand working and living with asbestos.

The main argument of the book is the association of asbestos and its many products with the development of severe lung disease, and how this has been dealt with. By detailing the history of asbestos mining in Australia, tracing product distribution and using personal stories obtained in interviews the authors set out to provide insight to the asbestos disaster, the roles of the various players in this and the founding by a former employee at Wittenoom of an Asbestos Diseases Society. The role of this society has been to support those with disease related to asbestos exposure in their fights for compensation and lobbying for legislative change.

Early chapters of Part 1 provide the reader with adequate background to the rise and fall of the asbestos industry, the occurrence of the different varieties, the effect of war on the asbestos industry, post war industrialization and the roles of government and companies in its exploitation.

War reduced supply of asbestos from elsewhere, for example, the importation of brake linings, and there was an increased demand for sheeting and pipes. Greater exploitation of Australian asbestos commenced, including that of the blue asbestos (crocidolite) at Wittenoom. The introduction of asbestos products into the general community became widespread post WW2 with a requirement for cheap housing which would be available for a growing population. And as industry grew and with it the building of new premises, production of such items as boiler insulation, brake linings and fire protection materials was increased. Using a variety of sources: geological survey reports, commercial directories, company reports and building and engineering journals, a picture is built of what was sold as an important new material.

A 1911 Perth advertisement detailing the advantage of a ‘modern’ house built using asbestos fibre notes,

A cooler house in summer, a warmer house in winter, a house that is fireproof, weatherproof, white ant proof, a house that looks 1000% better than a tin house...

No doubt this had great appeal in its day. A figure derived from Census data (1921-1971, p. 48) provides the number of ‘fibro’ houses per State over a 50year period, with a peak being reached in 1966 when 18.5% of all occupied houses Australia wide were of fibro construction. Some of this still remains and becomes evident in clean up of damage following natural disasters.

The principal protagonists in exploitation of asbestos in Australia were Wunderlich, CSR (Australian Blue Asbestos), later Micalco Pty Ltd, and James Hardie

Asbestos. There were also a number of smaller companies involved in mining and manufacturing of its many useful products.

The NSW Department of Public Health Annual Report of 1933 recorded the diagnosis of asbestosis by the Medical Officer of Industrial Hygiene, of an employee of an asbestos mill in NSW – the first such in Australia. Although workplace hygiene officers were commenting upon and reporting poor work conditions to ‘authorities’, little was done to mitigate these and regulation where it existed was rarely enforced. While the relation of asbestos dust and disease had been recognised as an occupational hazard in the UK since 1930, this received little recognition in Australia. Companies failed to put means of dust reduction in place, until there was government intervention through recommendations for change in work practices. Professional groups such as industrial hygienists and medical officers were unwilling to cooperate with each other, and many could see no problem. *Dust in great volumes* had been noted in a 1919 Geological Survey by Tasmanian Department of Mines at the Wunderlich Anderson Creek Mine in Northern Tasmania. As there is no further mention in the chapter dealing with dust hazard it is unlikely that this received any attention by the mine operator.

Part 2 takes the reader through medical aspects of asbestosis, lung cancer and mesothelioma and the health outcomes for those so affected. Bill Musk, writing in Chapter 5, provides background to the recognition in the nineteenth century of disease related to various types of asbestos, and to the limits of treatment available to sufferers of lung disease. This is complemented by biostatistician Geoffrey Berry, when, in Chapter 6, he considers statistical aspects and overseas research referenced from research papers from many countries, for example, *British Journal of Industrial Medicine*, *Transactions of the Society of Occupational Medicine*, *Medizinische, Deutsches Arkiv fur klinische Medizin*, and *Biological Effects of Mineral Fibres*, ed. J. C. Wagner.

Part 3 (perhaps of most interest to the general reader) introduces the personal stories of those whose lives have been affected by their contact with asbestos, and the struggle they have faced not only to gain acknowledgement of disease but also to gain compensation for loss of livelihood.

The story of many members of one family whose living and working centred around the open cut chrysotile (white asbestos) mine at Baryulgil, NSW, tells of children playing in the tailings, mine workers coming home covered in dust. By the standards of the day (1 million particles per cubic foot) the mine and associated mill exceeded this. As the workforce of the mine was 85-90% Aboriginal, who were also subject to poor living conditions, it is not surprising that former resident Tony Mundine reflected on the toll on his family

I’ve lost my father (at age 51) five uncles, three sister and two of my four brothers---money doesn’t mean much when you look at what the mine has done to the community—

The history of the litigation associated with asbestos disease is outlined in some detail by John Gordon (of Slater and Gordon), commencing with the first litigation occurring in the US in 1927 when a weaver in an asbestos factory claimed compensation from his employer, which he received for disability resulting from employment. Company insurers became alarmed at the growing incidence of asbestos disease and the increase in related claims for compensation. The author quotes many examples of litigation both in UK and also in Australia. These Australian examples range over many years from 1930s to late 1990s, and provide insight into the range of persons affected, comments on the role of the companies involved, and their failure, in many instances, to exercise a duty of care to employees and indirectly to families. Many of the cases quoted

show that not infrequently difficulty was encountered by the litigants in obtaining acceptance of the causation of the disease, and companies such as CSR/ ABA/ Midalco with limited liability did their best to avoid payment of compensation.

The perspectives of medical practitioners and litigators who worked closely with asbestosis sufferers are included in the last part of the book as is a brief history of James Hardie Co. and its role and liabilities vis a vis asbestos. The final chapter by former trade unionist Greg Combet, outlines the role of the trade unions. In spite of the chapter heading *The Bernie Banton Story*, less than one page is devoted to this. The remaining pages refer mainly to the complexity of the union negotiations undertaken with James Hardie Asbestos, and their serious attempts to frustrate these negotiations to obtain compensation for workers, and their efforts to ensure that the company would have sufficient finance to make this possible.

Who will read this book? It will have interest for anyone who wishes to gain a comprehensive picture of what mining of asbestos has meant in an Australian context. Its thesis is well supported by a comprehensive collection of writings from a range of authors both professional and lay.

Some criticism of company and government actions can be detected in earlier parts. These are detailed, and the slow and hard-won recognition of problems and subsequent changes to Occupational Health over the past 100 years are brought to light. Students of public/occupational health, or law will, with the general reader, find much of interest here.

The chief weakness (if any) would have been avoidable with more stringent editing. There is a tendency for content which has been included in previous chapters by other authors to be repeated. In discussion of mine sites, a good map showing Australian locations is desirable as are visuals of lungs - what do normal lungs versus diseased lungs look like? A few of the figures presented would seem to be somewhat irrelevant to the text as they do not enhance it, for example, Fig.1 (xv1) the Witness Seminar Panel or Fig.13.1 p. 285 which shows a group of men 'testing dust levels' – these men are immobile in front of the Mine Store and certainly not testing anything! Whilst of general interest, the last few chapters do not add a great deal to the thesis of the book - as they appear to be reiteration. This leads the reader to view the work more as a collection of articles by selected experts rather than as an edited whole, albeit a whole of interest.

Due to the latency of disease development and the amount of asbestos in many forms which remains and puts the community at risk whenever natural disasters occur, this book leaves a warning that the asbestos story remains an unfinished one.

For a reader who wishes to gain some insight into the complexities of the now defunct asbestos industry it is worthwhile expending some time and effort on this book, and for those whose interests lie in industrial disease it will provide much food for thought.

**Anne Both**