

# Breathtaking

Asbestos diseases kill thousands in the UK every year. But these are not just statistics, they are all stories of pain, hardship and bereavement. *Hazards* editor Rory O'Neill spoke to mesothelioma sufferer Colin Dyal late last year.

**C**olin Dyal worked for over 30 years for Goodyear in the West Midlands. As an instrument technician, most of his working life was spent in the boiler house, providing power to the large tyre plant.

When he developed a pain in his left shoulder in his early 50s, he just put it down to rheumatism. But a physio was worried the shoulder was not improving and told him to see a doctor. Colin was first told he could have the asbestos cancer mesothelioma in May 2002, and the diagnosis was confirmed in August. He was 56.

He won an out-of-court compensation settlement from the company. "The photographic evidence alone was overwhelming. If they had sent in a safety bloke it would have been shutdown," he said.

"I went in 12 months ago and it was much the same, but the area was cordoned off and the lads had put up danger signs."

According to Colin, the boiler house was full of asbestos, layered on the boilers and on the miles of 18 inch pipes running throughout the plant. "It's pretty much the same now as it was in the 1970s and 1980s," he said. A removal programme started, but was then abandoned. "Around

this time the firm also sent us for regular x-rays, but this also stopped after a while. They did start giving us masks and proper overalls in the late 1980s, but they never said why they were needed.

"I didn't realise asbestos was dangerous because I'd been around it all my life. No one ever told us the risks we were facing. Now I'm very angry. At the time I knew nothing about the risks, didn't even think about it. Even in the late 1980s, if you needed to

get to a valve that had been covered with asbestos lagging, you'd just knock it off and pick the pieces up off the floor and put them in the bin. Any remnants were just swept up later.

"You could see it in the atmosphere - the building was 60 feet high and half a mile long. There was a massive problem with pigeons which were knocking the lagging down all the time." Colin kept copies of safety committee minutes recording the problem. "If it was something to do with tyres, they'd get it fixed, anything else, nothing, it would be postponed to the next meeting."

Colin was originally included in a trial for a new chemo treatment, Alimta, which has been shown in studies to slow the progress of mesothelioma, and which seemed to offer some improvement in his own health. "For six months I felt brilliant".

But when the trial finished he was told his health authority in Shropshire would not provide the drug on the NHS. Instead he paid for his treatment, which costs tens of thousands of pounds.

"You have to fight for Alimta, you have to fight for hospital beds for biopsies and you have to fight for appointments," he said.

He'd had breathlessness



**HUMAN FACE** Colin and Sandra Dyal had just celebrated their 40th wedding anniversary when he died in January 2006. "He was a great man," said Sandra. "He never gave up hope. I'm so glad we treasured the days together. There's a lot of sorrow at the moment, but I will always have the memories."

**Building worker:** Allen Hurst died aged 57 as a result of asbestos exposure when he worked stripping out buildings over 30 years earlier. A March 2006 inquest heard he died from mesothelioma on 18 December 2005. Coroner Edward Thomas said at the Hatfield inquest he had no doubt Mr Hurst died of an industrial disease. Mr Hurst's wife Shirley said: "This illness is terribly painful and I didn't realise how much a person could go through until I saw Allen go through his last four months."

**Rail worker:** A February 2006 inquest ruled that Leonard Foster died aged 64 as a result of asbestos exposure. In a statement written before his death in October 2005, Mr Foster, who worked most of his adult life for British Rail, said he was regularly exposed to asbestos at work. North-east Cumbria coroner David Osborne said he died as a result of exposure to asbestos which caused mesothelioma and ultimately bronchial pneumonia.

**Mother:** A pensioner died because she used to handwash the clothes of her son and husband which had been contaminated with asbestos. At a March 2006 inquest into the death of 83-year-old Constance Mary Gardiner, Oxfordshire coroner Nicholas Gardiner recorded a verdict of death by industrial disease. He said: "I'm satisfied that Mrs Gardiner was probably exposed to asbestos which was almost certainly from her son's overalls and quite likely from her



Photo: Eve Barker

and pain since his diagnosis, but had managed to maintain some of his pastimes, including short rounds of golf, walking and holidays.

By early 2005, though, at the age of 59, the symptoms started to get much worse and he had to give up "just about everything."

He said: "Now when I climb the stairs to go to bed, I have to sit down for five minutes to get my breath before I can lie down."

"I have problems walking any sort of distance. I went to the town centre last week and lasted 20 minutes - and 10 minutes of that was resting. I don't want to sit in front of the fire in a dressing gown waiting for it to happen. I want to try and keep some normality."

Colin died just after his 60th birthday on 11 January 2006.

**COMPENSATION SLASHED** Bereaved relatives protested outside Parliament in March and May, at the start and end of a successful insurance industry House of Lords legal challenge which will mean reduced payouts to thousands of asbestos victims. The 3 May majority decision will result in a compensation limit in cases involving several employers. Unions, asbestos victims' organisations and safety groups condemned the ruling and called for new laws to protect claimants from "this cruel and unjust decision" (page 6). [www.asbestosforum.org](http://www.asbestosforum.org)



Photo: Eve Barker

**DEADLY MISTAKE** UK authorities and medical experts failed to predict an epidemic of asbestos disease in construction workers or that workers from teachers to nurses would be affected too. But *Hazards* did - and was sued in 1984 for speaking out.

husband's and I am recording a verdict that she died of the industrial disease mesothelioma."

**Factory worker:** A March 2006 inquest heard that former factory worker Leslie Lee died after being exposed to asbestos at the Wagon Works factory in Gloucester. The 83-year-old's wife Peggy told the inquest that her husband worked with asbestos on a regular basis. Gloucestershire coroner Alan Crickmore said: "It may be a stopping of the heart that caused

his death but the propensity to suffer that fate was increased by the asbestosis."

**Floor layer:** George Thompson, a widower who was exposed to asbestos working as a flooring specialist, died of the asbestos cancer mesothelioma. At a February 2006 inquest, Herts coroner Edward Thomas recorded a verdict of death by industrial disease. Mr Thompson died in October 2005, aged 77.

## SCHOOL DEATHS PROMPT RENEWED ASBESTOS WARNINGS

Schools have been issued new official guidelines for dealing with classroom asbestos after teaching union NUT revealed over 100 teachers have died from contact with the substance in the past 20 years.

After the union raised its asbestos concerns, the Health and Safety Executive's (HSE) chemicals advisory committee, WATCH, investigated the potential exposure to asbestos fibres from pinning or tacking pupils' work to wall panels containing asbestos. The committee concluded that inserting and removing drawing pins into asbestos board should be avoided, prompting HSE to reissue guidelines to schools.

Recent tragedies have highlighted the risks. Ian White, 66, the headteacher at St Cuthbert's Roman Catholic school in Carlisle, died of the asbestos cancer mesothelioma on Christmas Day 2005, prompting north-east Cumbria coroner David Osborne to contact HSE. And a December 2005 inquest ruled that primary school teacher Barbara Dover died from an industrial disease, lung cancer caused by asbestos from a boiler room next to her class.

Michael Lees, whose wife Gina, an art teacher, died aged 51 in 2000 from mesothelioma, said throughout her 30-year career his wife would display pupils' artwork by hanging it from asbestos ceiling tiles. "My aim is to stop teachers and everyone else being exposed to asbestos in schools," he said.

The NUT figures revealed that in the last 20 years 114 teachers had died as a result of coming into contact with asbestos. Another 68 had died from asbestos-related cancer, but it was unclear whether those cases could be linked to asbestos in the classroom. HSE's own figures show 147 education workers died from mesothelioma in the decade between 1991 and 2000, 73 of them primary and secondary school teachers.

NUT general secretary Steve Sinnott said: "Where asbestos may be present, teachers should take heed of the advice not to mount displays using drawing pins, staples or screws. Teachers and pupils should be properly protected from the hazards of asbestos and the NUT will continue its vigilance." NUT has now issued updated guidance for union safety reps.

NUT guidance: [www.teachers.org.uk/hands.php](http://www.teachers.org.uk/hands.php)  
HSE guidance: [www.hse.gov.uk/asbestos](http://www.hse.gov.uk/asbestos)