

Fighting cancer

Photo: Lee Boswell/Manchester Evening News



Walking past a workplace was enough to give Leigh Carlisle, 27, an incurable cancer. Can you think of a better argument for occupational and environmental cancer prevention?

We know in the region of 18,000 people in Great Britain die of occupational cancer each year (*Hazards* 92). Around 32,000 new cases are diagnosed each year. But industrial cancers don't stop at the factory gate.

Leigh Carlisle's condition – the asbestos cancer mesothelioma – has been traced back to a short cut on her way to primary school which took her by a factory. "I know that men working there cut asbestos sheets and handled asbestos materials in the yard, but I had no idea that by walking through the yard I could have inadvertently got cancer," she said.

Geraldine Coombs of Irwin Mitchell solicitors, who is acting for Leigh, said she is representing more people with work-related cancers who have never worked in traditional industrial jobs. "We are also representing a nurse in her 40s who worked in a Tameside hospital where there was an asbestos removal programme."

'Work' cancers are now affecting generations of the same family. The Ministry of Defence (MoD) agreed liability in February 2007 for the mesothelioma killing Debbie Brewer, 47. She was exposed to the asbestos brought home on her father Philip Northmore's clothing and hair when he was a logger at Devonport Dockyard in the 1960s. He died from asbestos-related lung cancer in August 2006.

In November 2006, 45-year-old Michelle Campbell, who developed mesothelioma as a result of exposure to asbestos from her grandfather's work clothing, was awarded a £145,000 MoD payout. She used to sit on granddad Charles Frost's knee when he popped in to visit on his way home from Portsmouth dockyards (*Hazards* 97).

Buried problem

Between 8 and 16 per cent of all cancers are the result of preventable, predictable workplace exposures (*Hazards* 92). The International Labour Organisation's estimate of over 664,000 work-related cancer

deaths worldwide each year suggests a figure of 10 per cent and is almost certainly a substantial underestimate, but still amounts to more than one work-related cancer death a minute.

Dozens of substances known to cause cancer are used, quite literally, in industrial quantities in our workplaces, frequently with few controls. At work, we face a barrage of rapidly evolving substances, work methods, processes and environments with little thought given to the health consequences that will face society – workers, families, entire communities – a working generation down the road.

What causes work cancer?

Many cancer causes are commonly encountered in UK workplaces today, including:

- ◆ Metals such as arsenic, chromium and nickel (cancers of the bladder, lung, and skin).
- ◆ Chlorination byproducts such as trihalomethanes (bladder cancer).
- ◆ Dusts including asbestos (cancers of the larynx, lung, mesothelioma, and stomach); silica (lung cancer); wood dust (nasal other and cancers).
- ◆ Petrochemicals and combustion products, including motor vehicle exhaust and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), (cancers of the bladder, lung, and skin).
- ◆ Pesticide exposures (cancers of the brain, Wilms' tumour, leukaemia, and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma).
- ◆ Reactive chemicals such as vinyl chloride (liver cancer and soft tissue sarcoma).
- ◆ Metalworking fluids and mineral oils (cancers of the bladder, larynx, nasal passages, rectum, skin and stomach).
- ◆ Ionising radiation (cancers of the bladder, bone, brain, breast, liver, lung, ovary, skin, and thyroid, as well as leukaemia, multiple myeloma and sarcomas).
- ◆ Solvents such as benzene (leukaemia and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma); tetrachloroethylene (bladder cancer); and trichloroethylene (Hodgkin's disease, leukaemia and kidney and liver cancers).
- ◆ Environmental tobacco smoke (cancers of the breast and lung).
- ◆ Other work factors including

outdoor worker exposure to sunlight (skin cancer) and shiftwork (breast cancer).

For a more detailed listing see the *Hazards* work cancer prevention guide: www.hazards.org/cancer/preventionkit

Workplace detectives

Unions have been instrumental in first identifying a number of workplace cancers, from bladder cancer in dye workers to liver cancer in vinyl chloride workers. Finding out if there is a workplace risk requires detective work.

Keep it simple. A quick discussion at a union meeting might provide all the information you need. Just make sure you involve the workforce – they know their jobs, their workmates and the real hazards of the job.

Do some digging. Are you aware of cases of cancer in workers or ex-workers? Are affected workers all doing similar jobs or using the same substances? Check with other union reps and colleagues, particularly those who have been at the firm or working in the industry for a long time.

There are lots of quick and easy ways to investigate health problems at work.

Risk maps Draw a basic map of the workplace, marking on the machines, workstations and the substances or processes used. Record on the risk map any health problems reported by workers doing particular jobs. Repeat the exercise periodically and see if any problems become apparent. If cancer causing substances or processes are being used, investigate alternatives and, if this is not possible, safer work methods (*Hazards* 60).

Body maps Draw two body outlines on a large piece of paper, one representing the front of a person, one the back. Get workers to write on where they feel pain or have had health problems or symptoms. If workers doing similar jobs identify similar problems, then you can start linking workplace factors to their health concerns (*Hazards* 61).

Investigations Review existing sources, like workplace sick leave,

accident, compensation and pension records. Don't forget retired members – many cancers take decades to emerge, so may only occur after a worker has finished working.

Newspaper reports may highlight local deaths linked to occupational disease. Where there is a suspicion of a problem, dig deeper (*Hazards* 89).

Surveys Do-it-yourself research can quickly identify problems. This need not be a highly scientific and time-consuming business. A union rep could ask workers on their lunch break if they have concerns about a particular job or substance, or if they had noticed any worrying sick leave trends or causes of ill-health in their workmates (*Hazards* 71).

www.hazards.org/tools

Steps for reps

1. Identify possible cancer risks in the workplaces. This is a job for safety reps, the safety committee or a union-organised "cancer prevention" committee.
2. Insist substances or processes presenting a cancer risk are where possible removed and substituted with less hazardous substances or safer work methods. Set priorities for action. Union priorities for dealing with risks are in order: elimination; substitution; control; and if nothing else is possible, personal protective equipment such as masks or protective clothing.
3. Ensure workers with work-related cancers are given the support they need and receive any sickness or compensation payments to which they are entitled.
4. Don't act alone – make sure the prevent cancer campaign has the support of the workforce and of the union in the workplace and at local and national levels.

Taking action

Get your priorities right. If you find out a cancer-causing substance or procedure is in use, negotiate safer substances, processes or work

WORK CANCER FACTS

- ◆ Occupational cancer is the top work killer worldwide, ahead of all other workplace diseases and accidents.
- ◆ Over 660,000 workers die of occupational cancers ever year, according to ILO – that's more than a death a minute. The true toll is certainly higher.
- ◆ More than 1 in every 5 workers faces a cancer risk from their work.
- ◆ Between 8 and 16 per cent of all cancers are the result of exposures at work.
- ◆ 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.
- ◆ Tens of thousands of workers generally have to die before scientific studies confirm a workplace cancer problem. A precautionary approach is always the safe and healthy option.

*Occupational cancer/Zero cancer: A union guide to prevention, IMF, 2007. www.imfmetal.org/cancer
Global estimates of fatal work-related diseases, American Journal of Industrial Medicine (AJIM), volume 50, pages 28-41, 2007.*

methods immediately. The best way to ensure you don't find any cancers in your workplace is to ensure there are no jobs where workers are at risk.

When a work-related cancer risk is suspected, a short-term investigation by union reps could include:

1. Gathering available evidence, for example death certificates or pension or sickness records, or industrial hygiene, health or media reports. List possible cancer risks in the workplace.
2. Analysing the information – is there a suspicion that a workplace or a part of the workplace has more than expected numbers of cancers? Are there exposures in the workplace that could place workers at risk?
3. Ensuring workers who have been exposed to a possible cancer risk have this recorded on their doctors' notes and work medical records, and are getting any advice and medical check-ups to help detect cancer in its early stages.
4. Ensure possible cancer risks are properly assessed. Remember official exposure limits are not that the same thing as a safe level.

Need more help? See: www.hazards.org/cancer



Photo: Jane Howie