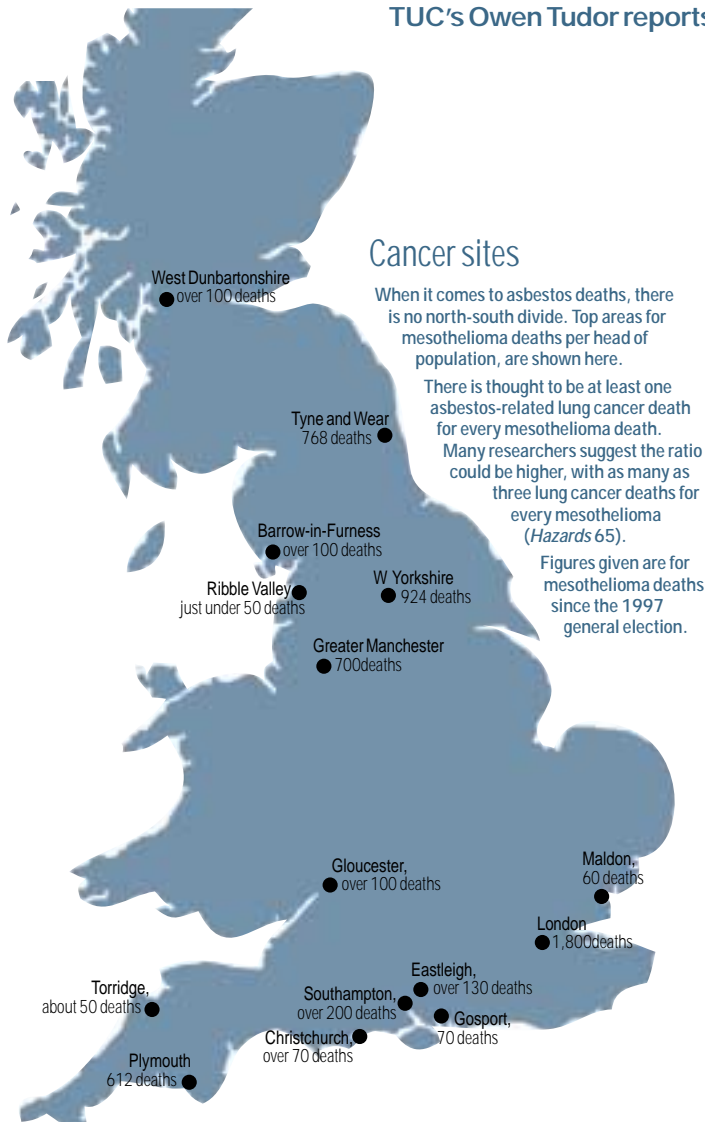


# Grave concern

A TUC analysis of asbestos death rates shows asbestos-related mesothelioma and lung cancer may soon be the main cause of male cancer deaths. Already, asbestos kills a quarter more people every year than road traffic accidents.

TUC's Owen Tudor reports.



In the four years since the 1997 general election 18,000 people in Great Britain have died from asbestos-related diseases. Each one of those people has died an agonising death, and left loved ones grieving – something the sheer scale of this modern plague often obscures.

There are “hotspots” and asbestos should be a major issue in the politics and communities of those areas. This is doubly important as many asbestos-related deaths, caused by workplace and environmental exposures, still go unattributed to asbestos.

The hotspots are almost always in areas with a history of heavy industry, where asbestos use was common in past decades.

Especially hard hit are the shipbuilding areas, like Clydeside in Scotland – a country where someone has died every day since the last election because of asbestos. In Glasgow alone there is one asbestos-related death every week.

Former shipbuilding area Tyneside, with 768 people dying in Tyne and Wear since 1997, is the worst

county area in England. Industrial Teesside with 264 deaths and Cumbria – 204 deaths, half of them in shipbuilding Barrow – are not far behind.

In the North West, nearly 2,000 people have died in the last four years, or almost 10 a week. 700 people have died in Greater Manchester.

Over the Pennines, in the old industrial heartlands around asbestos manufacturing sites like Hebden Bridge, the geography of the area has been scarred by the legacy of this fatal fibre, with 924 deaths across West Yorkshire.

The South also has an industrial and shipbuilding background. London's East End is particularly badly hit, because of the docks where so much asbestos was imported.

Over 120 people have died in Barking and Dagenham, over 100 in Havering, 80 in Newham. In London as a whole, 1,800 people have died since the general election – like Scotland, a death every day for four years.

On the south coast, the dockyards of Plymouth have produced 612 deaths in Devon, the second worst

**Fibre folly:** Government plans to amend workplace asbestos regulations “lack crucial detail and are not strict enough to shield workers from potential life-threatening illness,” the Association of Personal Injury Lawyers has warned. APIL is “deeply concerned” at a proposal requiring employers to survey premises for asbestos “because there is every likelihood that he will know absolutely nothing about the use or presence of asbestos in buildings”. APIL wants a presumption that buildings contain asbestos, unless proven otherwise.

APIL's detailed response can be found on its website at: <http://www.apil.com>

**Dot.cancer:** TUC is backing a web-based national asbestos register of buildings containing asbestos. The not-for-profit dot.com, AsbestosRegister.com, launched in March, “eventually aims to list every property in the UK containing asbestos.” TUC estimates 85 per cent of commercial properties in the UK, or about 850,000 buildings, contain asbestos. The TUC wants the Health and Safety Commission to make it a legal duty to publish asbestos

registers, and is pressing for AsbestosRegister.com to be used for this purpose.

**Little insurance:** Asbestos victims should not lose out after the collapse of a personal injury insurer, the TUC and the All Party Group on Occupational Health and Safety have said. PricewaterhouseCoopers, administering the assets of Chester Street (formerly Iron Trades), said only five per cent of the company's debts would be paid. TUC and the parliamentary group now wants the insurance industry to create a £95 million a year compensation fund for

affected county in England. Torridge and Plymouth are worst hit.

Portsmouth and Southampton have contributed some of the worst death rates in Great Britain, not just in the Labour-voting working class urban areas, but in areas with Conservative and Liberal Democrat MPs too – Eastleigh, the Isle of

Wight and Christchurch. Across the three counties of Dorset, Hampshire and Wiltshire, nearly 1,400 people have died in the last four years.

Members of Parliament need to be made aware of these figures. The asbestos sub-committee of the All Party Group on Occupational Safety and Health provides them with a vehi-

cle for assisting sufferers. The sub-committee, chaired by Michael Clapham MP, is backed by the TUC and has already helped improve information provision, benefit entitlement and medical services to sufferers.

Asbestos should be a local scandal all over Great Britain just as it is a scandal all over the world.

World Trade Organisation danger



Asbestos ban can stand, but...

Canada's attempt to push its asbestos on unwilling countries has failed, but has left loopholes that could allow the World Trade Organisation to force deadly exports on unwilling nations, all in the name of free trade.

In May 1998, the Canadian government complained formally to the WTO after France introduced a national asbestos ban (*Hazards* 63). The complaint was rejected by WTO in September 2000 (*Hazards* 71, 72). On 12 March 2001 WTO rejected Canada's appeal as unfounded, allowing France to keep its asbestos ban without fear of trade reprisals. A UK ban took effect in November 1999.

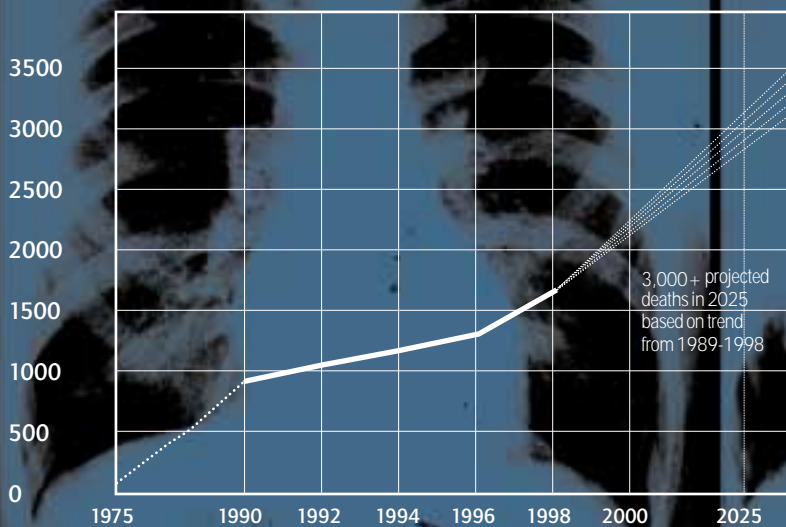
The WTO Appellate Body considering Canada's latest case accepted that as a carcinogen asbestos cannot be considered a "like product" to substitute materials.

However, the body did uphold Canada's argument that the Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) does apply to measures like the asbestos ban. This means other nations pushing hazardous products might be supported when challenging a substance ban introduced on health grounds.

The case also highlights the lack of transparency at WTO. The Appellate Body, the WTO's highest legal body, received an unprecedented reprimand from governments last autumn when it decided to establish procedures for the acceptance of "amicus curiae" or "friends of the court" briefs from parties with an interest in the asbestos dispute; unions and victims' organisations were among those who prepared submissions. All were subsequently rejected.

Deadly evidence

Death certificates mentioning the asbestos cancer mesothelioma, by year (male and female).



Source: *Health and Safety Statistics 1999/2000*, National Statistics/Health and Safety Commission, 2000. Figures for 1994-1998 are provisional, pending comparison with cancer registries.

the next 40 years so victims do not lose out (also see *Hazards* 73).

**Killers quarrel:** Two giants in the world of lung cancer deaths, the tobacco and asbestos industries, are squabbling in the US courts. Asbestos companies including British court-proven killer T&N are seeking reimbursement of payouts to smokers compensated for asbestos disease. Among the dozen plus defendants in the case are cigarette giants British American Tobacco (BAT), R.J. Reynolds, Philip Morris, Brown & Williamson, and RJR Nabisco Inc. The asbestos companies say Big

Tobacco conspired to mislead workers about a "lethal synergy," knowing their products "were especially harmful to smokers who were also occupationally exposed to asbestos."

**Exposing kids:** A 15-year-old boy was exposed to asbestos on a council work experience programme. The boy, on a scheme organised by Wolverhampton Metropolitan Borough Council, was exposed to brown asbestos over a five day period. The Council, which had ignored its own procedures, was prosecuted and fined £20,000 and over £1,000 costs at West Bromwich Magistrates' Court.