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YVONNE BERG/TORONTO STAR

Cobourg resident Jeanette Blue with son David and his sons, Noah, left, and Evan. A boilermaker like his father, who died of asbestosis in 2006, David, wears a protective mask on the job to eliminate exposure to the mineral that went unrecognized as a major health hazard for decades.



Long latency period for cancers caused by asbestos means many patients don't make the connection

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John Blue was 68 when he died of cancer. After working 30-odd years as a boilermaker, he had hoped to enjoy retirement. Then he was diagnosed with asbestosis in 2004.

A little more than a year later, after he complained of severe back pain, doctors found he was riddled with cancer in his lungs, spine, bowels and bones. He died in June 2006. The cause of the cancer: Asbestos exposure in the workplace.

For his wife Jeanette, their three children and five grandchildren, Blue's death has been devastating.

"He never realized he had been exposed to asbestos until it was discovered in 2004," she says. "It was a shock. We just lived for each other and enjoyed each other's company. It's a sad loss."

The Blue family is not alone. Growing numbers of Canadians are being diagnosed with asbestos-related cancers, particularly those who worked in construction, mining, milling and

manufacturing. Experts predict a wave of such cancers – years after workplace exposure – will start to peak in a decade or so.

And they caution that such cases are vastly under-reported.

"We are in the midst of an epidemic of work-related mesothelioma cases," says Larry Stoffman, chair of the National Committee on Environmental and Occupational Exposure and co-author of a report on asbestos exposure and cancer deaths for Cancer Care Ontario.

Stoffman says a national registry is needed to track suspected or related cases. Support from Ottawa, however, has been poor, he says. No one is talking about the issue, even though a Conservative minister, Chuck Strahl, has mesothelioma probably caused by exposure to asbestos when he worked as a logger. Strahl declined an interview.

New male cases of mesothelioma – a cancer that attacks the protective membrane around organs – have increased from 153 in 1984 to 344 in 2003, according to a study published this spring.

Scientists also estimate that for every mesothelioma there are two asbestos-related lung cancers. Stoffman says there could be as many as 500 cancer cases a year in Ontario caused by asbestos.

Asbestos was once widely used for insulation, fire protection and acoustical purposes. Only in the 1970s and 1980s was the full extent of its health effects understood.

World consumption plummeted, lawsuits were filed and millions were spent ripping it out of public buildings, schools and workplaces.

Besides lung cancer and mesothelioma – a rare and usually fatal cancer whose only known cause is asbestos exposure – inhaling asbestos dust and fibre can lead to asbestosis, a respiratory disease, pleural plaques, and possibly gastrointestinal and larynx cancers.

The latency period for mesothelioma is 30 to 40 years, which explains why so many cases are suddenly appearing now.

But in 2007, only 29 asbestos-related fatality claims were approved, according to the Ontario Workplace Safety and Insurance Board.

A joint study between Cancer Care Ontario and the WSIB found 1,487 male cases of mesothelioma between 1980 and 2002, but only 568 cases were registered with the WSIB. Stoffman says the discrepancy occurs because families and physicians often fail to connect the cancer to asbestos.

For Jeanette Blue, the loss of her husband has been softened somewhat financially by the survivor's pension she receives from the insurance board. Blue's death is a stark reminder of occupational hazards for his son, Dave, also a boilermaker. When his father was young, there were no regulations or procedures to follow if asbestos was present in the workplace.

"It was thought then that asbestos wasn't harmful at all," Dave says – so much so that some tradesmen confess they were fearless about working with it. They ripped out insulation from old boilers without masks or protective gear, or sat on asbestos fire blankets while they ate lunch – something that makes them shudder now.

Boilermakers "have yet to pay the full price for historically poor management, absent controls and inadequate training when it came to working with asbestos up to the early 1990s," says

Jason McInnis, national director of health and safety for the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers.

The sale of pure asbestos and some consumer products has been banned in Canada under the Hazardous Products Act. But the deadly substance is still used in making asbestos cement, industrial insulating material and friction products such as brake linings.

Canada continues to mine asbestos in Quebec and export it to the developing world, to the ire of groups such as the World Health Organization and the International Labour Organization, which want Canada to ban all mining outright.

Some studies suggest asbestos-related deaths now make up almost 31 per cent of all workplace fatalities.

WHO is also calling on Canada to set up a national registry for cancer deaths due to asbestos. It estimates that worldwide there are 90,000 cases a year of cancer due to asbestos exposure. The International Labour Organization puts it between 100,000 to 140,000 cases a year. In a decade those cases will grow to close to a million annually worldwide, Stoffman predicts. Studies find only one-third of mesothelioma victims receive any kind of compensation, says Paul Demers, director of the School of Environmental Health at the University of British Columbia. A national registry could keep track of all cases and claims, he says.

Patrick Dillon, business manager of the Provincial Building and Construction Trades Council of Ontario, believes anyone who has been exposed to or worked with asbestos should be included in the registry, in case disease shows up later.