

Asbestos takes its toll on a new generation

The relatives of two victims are driving awareness in the US

James Brewer

A CONTINENT apart, tragedy struck two fine, fit men whose working life had touched on the marine sector.

Bill Shields, who had worked in the naval shipyard at Yorktown, Virginia, was diagnosed in 2004 with mesothelioma. He lived for only eight months after that.

Alan Reinstein — a Californian who at one stage had been a nuclear engineer in a New York shipyard — developed a slight cough, and he too needed extra-pleural pneumonectomy, which is surgery to remove the lung along and its coverings, but sadly passed way in 2006.

It is unknown whether the fatal contact with asbestos fibre came for Mr Shields and for Mr Reinstein professionally or domestically, but they shared the untimely demise that has laid low thousands of others around the world who have breathed in toxins during mining, shipping, shipbuilding, shipbreaking and other industrial activity.

As they were enduring these family crises, Doug Larkin, son-in-law of Mr Shields, and Linda Reinstein, who was clutching a photo of her then terminally ill husband Alan, sat in the back row of a meeting in Washington DC about asbestos related diseases. Then strangers, they realised they had suffered similar blows, and went on to become leaders in a new campaign.

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Linda Reinstein says the World Trade Center disaster is a recent cause of non-occupational exposure to asbestos.

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They determined to start a foundation named the Asbestos Disease Awareness Organization "which has enabled us to harness our anger and grief", she says.

Since that day in 2004, the organisation has built up a database of 3,500 supporters and has taken its passionate advocacy for asbestos victims widely.

Its members are determined to remedy what they perceive as a huge gap in public awareness of the extent of asbestos related disease, and elevate public consciousness to the level it has reached in regard to other scourges including AIDS and breast cancer.

According to the International Labour Organisation, around 100,000 workers die every year from asbestos related disease, but Mr Larkin and Mrs Reinstein speculate that there are a further 40% or 50% more deaths among people uncounted by such authorities.

Most asbestos patients were under the mistaken impression asbestos had been banned, says Mrs Reinstein. She says that the US has more than 30m homes, schools and public buildings contaminated with asbestos.

Mr Larkin and Mrs Reinstein have spent much time seeking to educate legislators on Capitol Hill — a location wherein lurks another worrying story.

Beneath the comfortable offices of Congress, run five miles of utility tunnels, which have begun to inspire considerable fear. Maintenance workers say that big slabs of concrete fall from the ceilings and the cramped passages are thick with welding fumes. As the slabs of concrete crash, they turn into pulverised asbestos and

cement dust. As well as workers inhaling the poison, fumes are sucked through exhaust fans, to leak into the air above ground.

Some politicians have rallied to the cause, and among those who have earned praise is Senator Patty Murray, a Democrat from Washington state who campaigns for national prohibitions on asbestos. The Senate has passed resolutions for an Asbestos Awareness Day, sponsored by Senator Harry Reid of Nevada, now Senate majority leader, and for an Awareness Week.

"We have been meeting with the former and current leadership of the Senate," says Mr Larkin. "We have built some great relationships in Washington."

Mrs Reinstein says the word "awareness" is the key. Most people have not even heard of mesothelioma, and are ignorant of the treatments and of the prognosis. "We have known victims have as little as two days from the time of diagnosis to death," she says. Her husband's experience was an indication "of the toxicity that we face as consumers and as Americans".

She and Mr Larkin had the ideal backgrounds for their campaigning work, she with a fund raising and non-profit organisation career, and he as a political press secretary and head of a public relations firm.

Mrs Reinstein says: "There is an increasing number of victims who are young with non-occupational exposure — which could be consumer or environmental exposure or through contamination from piping in building released by, say,

the destruction of the World Trade Center or the damage caused by Hurricane Katrina.

"A generation was exposed from the late 1940s to the late 1970s. Now younger people who have been exposed are getting sick and dying."

Apart from seeking to prevent exposures, the awareness organisation is anxious to secure earlier diagnoses so that people can have more treatment options. In addition, says Mr Larkin: "If we can raise the power of awareness, we can raise the funding for a cure."

A national US awareness conference has just taken place in Philadelphia, and another is planned for Detroit in March 2008. During her visit to London, Mrs Reinstein was honoured with an award for her work in fighting for the rights of victims of asbestos in the US and globally.

The award, from the Forum of UK Asbestos Support Groups, was presented during a seminar at Westminster hosted by the All Party Parliamentary Occupational Safety & Health Group, which is chaired by Michael Clapham MP.

Accepting the award, she noted that Parliament passed a resolution in June 1806 about the abolition of slavery. While asbestos use has been illegal for the past few years in the UK and some other countries, Mrs Reinstein would like to see similar declarations today from legislatures "conceiving asbestos to be contrary to the principles of justice, humanity and sound policy...and the same is hereby utterly abolished, prohibited, and declared to be unlawful."

www.asbestosdiseaseawareness.org