

A village waits for the blue death

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Lena Matshogo (46) holds up an X-ray of her lungs. Her left lung is clearly visible, but her right lung is buried under a haze of white. She has just undergone surgery to drain fluid from the lung, but doctors have given her bad news. She has mesothelioma, the same disease that killed her husband six years ago.

Mesothelioma also killed both her parents. She knows many others in Vergenoeg village – friends and relatives – who have died from this disease.

She says she is prepared for anything, even death, but is worried about her five children. Her parents worked on asbestos mines, her mother as a cleaner and her father as a labourer. Matshogo also worked on the mines as a labourer and cleaner.

Later, her father left the mines to work on a farm. The farm was covered with asbestos.

“We knew nothing. We used the asbestos flakes to clean our teeth. We drank water from dams that were blue in colour.

It is only now we understand it was blue asbestos, which is killing us now. Sometimes we picked up the flakes and ate them like sweets. We were young and this thing looked so beautiful,” she says.

When they left the farm to live in Vergenoeg in the early 1970s, they found lots of asbestos flakes there as well.

Almost the entire village’s adult population worked on the various asbestos mines nearby. They returned home in work overalls covered in asbestos. Trucks carrying asbestos would park in the village overnight, leaving blue asbestos in their wake.

Villagers took the sacks used to carry asbestos to build shacks.

They cooked in these shacks and sometimes children slept there.

They also used asbestos slabs as rooftops for their houses. Today, Vergenoeg, like the other villages around the asbestos mines northeast of Kuruman, has become a village of asbestos widows and orphans.

“Most of the men are gone. This is a village of death,”

Matshogo says. “Asbestos has left a dark cloud here. Now children grow up without parents because of asbestos, and they end up leading terrible lives,” she says.

Her husband worked at a number of asbestos mines. When he was diagnosed with mesothelioma he suffered a nervous breakdown.

“He was saying if he knew this thing was so dangerous he would never have worked there. He was worried about our children,” she says.

When she was diagnosed, Matshogo thought about death.

“But now I am not worried any more. I am prepared for anything. I am just worried about my children because they are still young,” she says.

Matshogo says she's comforted by the knowledge that at least her children have a decent home, a brick house she built with the payout from her husband's claim.

But it looks unlikely that the cycle of death will cease soon because every time the wind blows

in Vergenoeg, it carries with it the deadly asbestos flakes that have already killed so many.

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