

# South Africa facing an asbestos epidemic

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By Clayton Barnes

Dozens of South Africans still die of asbestos-related diseases every year, despite the closure of asbestos mines in the mid-1980s.

The most recent victims, a 19-year-old and a 60-year-old man from Kuruman in the Northern Cape, died last week from secondary pollution from asbestos.

The deaths came in the wake of a 2005/6 government study on the extent of pollution at former mining sites.

The objective of the study was to highlight the potential extent of secondary pollution.

The two deaths came also after the announcement of the government's intention to introduce new legislation to prohibit the use, manufacture, import and export of asbestos and any materials containing the mineral fibres.

Dr Shahieda Adams, a medical specialist in occupational and environmental health, said although the government was trying to prohibit the use and manufacture of asbestos, the fibre had a long latency period and problems could manifest only years after people were exposed to it.

She told Weekend Argus that in some cases it could take up to 30 years for the disease to manifest.

"That's why we still see people dying today. We are actually hitting the asbestos epidemic now. And, on top of that, people in the Northern Cape are still exposed to secondary pollution from asbestos as a result of the fibre being used in their homes and buildings and to insulate structures in that area."

Adams said although Capetonians were seldomly infected with the deadly lung disease, there had been asbestos-related cases, especially among those in the asbestos cement, manufacturing and construction industries.

"Asbestos was used extensively in this country before government's ban," she said.

"It was used in roofing sheets, cement and in other manufacturing material. The lung institute sees people, who worked in these industries years ago, on a weekly basis.

"Then there are also people who moved to Cape Town from the Northern Cape or other mining provinces. And in almost all the cases it's people over 50 years old who worked on the mines or in the construction and manufacturing industry who have been affected."

The diseases caused by asbestos range in severity from mild to lethal, but are incurable, progressive and, in most cases, only occur decades after exposure.

The disease occurs in response to inhaling asbestos fibres. The fibres may eventually cause scarring of the lungs or malignant growths, asbestos-related lung cancer or mesothelioma.

Asbestos-related lung cancer is a cancer which forms in the spongy parts of the lung. It grows very quickly and causes a bloody cough, shortness of breath and chest pain.

Mesothelioma is also a cancer and starts on the outer surface of the lung. It grows quickly and starts pushing on, and enclosing, the lungs, causing shortness of breath, severe pain, fatigue and weight loss.

Prognoses vary among people, depending on the extent of damage to the lungs.

"Someone with an asbestos-related disease could live for a long time, but once the person develops cancer from it they often don't live beyond a year," said Adams.

"It's important for the diagnosis to be made as early as possible.

"If an X-ray is not taken of the lungs, medical practitioners will never know if the patient is suffering from an asbestos-related disease or not.

"Although nothing can really be done when the lung is damaged, treatment is available for relief."

Adams welcomed the government's move to ban materials manufactured from asbestos, but said the country would still see a lot of asbestos-related cases over the next 10 to 20 years.

"There are also concerns of the secondary wave of asbestos," she said.

"This could be due to secondary asbestos pollution, when old buildings and structures, built with asbestos fibre, are demolished or damaged. The people who work or clean the ruins inhale the asbestos fibres and can also be affected."

Meanwhile, the Asbestos Relief Trust, with its head office in Johannesburg, has been assisting victims of asbestos-related diseases since 2003.

- For more information about the trust, call 011 530 8460.

<http://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/south-africa-facing-an-asbestos-epidemic-1.387099>