

September 26th: Mesothelioma Awareness Day

September 26th, 2009

September 26th marks national Meso Awareness Day. Meso, short for mesothelioma, is a lethal, extremely painful cancer in which membrane cells lining the chest or abdomen become malignant. The resulting tumor thickens and hardens, crushing the lungs and suffocating the patient, invading the chest wall so that even breathing is excruciating, or invading the heart, aorta or other vital organs and causing catastrophic failure. Average prognosis is only 4 – 14 months.

Meso is caused by exposure to asbestos, identified by the EPA as "one of the most hazardous substances to which humans are exposed in both occupational and non-occupational settings." For decades, even after its deadly toxicity were well known to medicine, industry and the government, asbestos was used heavily in construction, industry, the Navy, even household products and appliances. It is still present in many homes, schools, and office buildings. Indeed, it is not yet even banned in the U.S. The disease can arise from small exposures, and even as much as 50 years later.

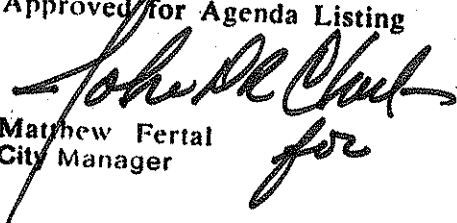
As a result, each year approximately 3,000 Americans and many thousands more worldwide develop mesothelioma. According to the EPA, over 20 million American workers suffered dangerous exposures and are at risk today of developing meso. The recent events of 9/11 and Katrina have exposed countless more, especially the heroic rescue workers and first-responders. During the collapse of the WTC towers, at least 400 tons of asbestos were released into the air in lower Manhattan.

Despite the risk and tragic toll of the disease, for decades the need for research to develop effective treatments for meso was ignored, obscured by the legal, economic and political aspects of asbestos. The National Cancer Institute's annual investment in clinical mesothelioma research has been, on a per death basis, only a fraction of its investment in other cancers. And, despite the disproportionate toll of the disease on Navy veterans and shipyard workers, the Department of Defense has never applied any of its vast biomedical research resources to mesothelioma.

As a result, research to understand meso has lagged far behind other cancers. Diagnosis is difficult and often delayed. Worse, once diagnosed, current attempts to treat the disease generally have only a limited effect. In 1980, when Steve McQueen was diagnosed with meso, the lack of effective treatment options caused him to turn in desperation to untested treatments in Mexico, where he died, eleven months after diagnosis. Twenty-three years later, when acclaimed singer-songwriter Warren Zevon was diagnosed, relatively little progress had been made, and Zevon died in 2003, one year after diagnosis.

But there is hope. Since 1999, the Mesothelioma Applied Research Foundation (Meso Foundation) has awarded over \$4 million to spur mesothelioma research forward. Researchers are gaining valuable understandings of the tumor and potential treatment targets, and new clinical trials are opening. Therefore, the Meso Foundation is calling for support of legislation proposed by Senator Patty Murray and Congresswoman Betty McCollum to finally ban asbestos, and for the federal government to invest in meso research.

To raise national awareness of the risks of the disease and the need for research to develop treatments for it, the Meso Foundation has launched a campaign to declare Sept. 26th each year Mesothelioma awareness day. The Meso Foundation is the non-profit collaboration of patients and families, physicians, advocates, and researchers dedicated to eradicating the life-ending and vicious effects of mesothelioma. The Foundation promotes critically-needed research to develop more effective treatments and ultimately a cure and has to date awarded over \$4 million in grant funding to promising studies around the world.

Approved for Agenda Listing

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for