

Asbestos danger unites group: Cancer patients, family members tell their stories, work to get product off the market

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Mar. 31--For Andrew Manuel, it began with back pain.

But the seemingly benign symptom turned out to be something far more sinister, and within two years, the married father of three shed 65 pounds, underwent surgery to have a lung removed and endured chemotherapy and radiation to no avail.

At 42, he was dead. The killer: mesothelioma, a cancer linked to asbestos.

"When I heard the diagnosis, I said, 'Meso-what?' " said Manuel's wife, Latanyta Manuel, 45, on Sunday. "All I heard was 'lung cancer,' and I said, 'No, that's not possible.' My husband never smoked or drank, but they said this cancer is about asbestos."

On Sunday, a group of people affected by the deadly disease, which they refer to as "meso" for simplicity's sake, gathered at the Marriott in downtown Detroit's Renaissance Center for a remembrance brunch.

The event was sponsored by California-based Asbestos Disease Awareness Organization and the Karmanos Cancer Institute in Michigan.

Some, such as Manuel, had lost loved ones. Others have been diagnosed with the deadly disease themselves.

They gather annually, they said, to support each other and to spread the word about asbestos-related diseases, including lung cancer and asbestosis.

Asbestos is a fiber that for decades was routinely used for fireproofing and insulation.

While the U.S. government has limited its use, asbestos still can be found in many products, including some stuccos, vinyl flooring and even theater curtains, according to the Asbestos Resource Center.

"Asbestos is still being imported. It's still being put in products," said Michelle Zigelbaum, whose husband, Paul, has been diagnosed with peritoneal mesothelioma.

By the time he was diagnosed, his stomach was so full of fluid and tumors that "I looked like a pregnant woman," Paul Zigelbaum said.

The Asbestos Disease Awareness Organization recently conducted a study that tested 250 products off store shelves for asbestos content. A first lab found that 18 of the products contained asbestos.

A second lab confirmed that eight of the products had asbestos, while a third confirmed that five products -- including a child's toy -- contained asbestos.

Those gathered Sunday said they and their loved ones got sick in different ways.

Andrew Manuel's father worked in a pipeline, bringing asbestos back into the home. Paul Zigelbaum said he believes he was exposed secondhand, too, but said he also believes that contact with everyday products contributed.

All blamed aggressive asbestos lobbyists as the reason the United States hasn't banned the substance altogether.

"It's disturbing to see how companies and politicians try to cover it up," said Dwayne Manuel, Andrew Manuel's 26-year-old son. "This is a preventable disease."

Latanyta Manuel said she just wants to honor her husband's wishes and spread awareness about the disease.

"Once it erupts, it just kind of takes over," she said. "People need to know."

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