



Workers' Memorial Day, Perth

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address by

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In 1823 a surgeon from St Barts Hospital in London reported his observations of a disease he dubbed "Chimney Sweepers cancer". This was one of the earliest records of scientific study into cancers caused by people's occupation. These, mostly young men and boys who could physically fit into the chimneys of industrial revolution London's home owners, made their livings in the tight sooty confines.

Constant exposure of their genitals to soot and tar, as they shimmy up and down their workplace led, all too often to scrotal cancer. Cases were mostly diagnosed in men aged 30 – 40 years and the disease was - as most cancer was in those days – fatal. And sometimes two or three generations of the same family experienced this awful fate.

Surgeon Mr H Earle wrote, nearly 200 years ago

"This circumstance may perhaps afford some consolation to those benevolent gentlemen, who, in commiseration of the hard fate of the children engaged in this vocation, have, in vain, endeavoured to call in the powerful aid of legislative authority in their behalf."

So for nearly two centuries doctors have known about exposures that people experience at work, which lead - in all too many cases to life threatening disease like cancer.

Of course these exposures and the disease that follows them develop over decades. They are not the same phenomenon as the devastating industrial accident or the shocking road crash. But they are just as real, and just as deadly.

Today in Australia occupational exposures to known carcinogens are estimated to cause over 5,000 new cases of cancer in Australia each year.

One estimate suggests 3.6 million Australians could be exposed to one or more carcinogens at work.

Some are very familiar to us all and exposure is not restricted to the workplace.

Ultra Violet radiation from the sun used to be considered only important if you go sunburnt at the beach in the middle of summer. But now it is recognised as one of the big issues in cancer caused by exposures at work, and millions of workers ply their trade in the great outdoors.

We are seeing more and more work done to reduce exposure to cigarette smoke in the workplace. Smoker or non-smokers – everyone deserves to work and breathe in a smoke free environment.

And of course the asbestos story is a devastating and powerful one that has played out in brutal fashion here in Western Australia. And is continuing to play out today.

But there are many more that get scant attention.

Diesel exhaust fumes is one of the biggest exposures and professional drivers and those exposed in confined places like underground mines.

Lead exposure in painters.

Wood dust for chippeys.

Pesticide exposure in farm workers.

The list is long.

There is a list Priority carcinogens applicable to the Australian industrial profile should be the focus of scientists and regulators.

The number of occupationally caused cancers compensated each year in Australia equates to less than eight percent of the expected number likely to actually occur.

Under-compensation may be a result of lack of awareness of occupational risk factors among workers and health professionals.

And there is the inherent difficulties in assigning a specific cancer case to an occupational cause that may have occurred two, three or more decades before the disease becomes apparent.

But none of that is a reason not to commit more effort and resources to remedy the problem we have known about since 1823.

To achieve No cancer at work – we need to know more about cancer at work. And we need to do more to remove the exposures, to discover more about what is – and is not contributing to cancer among our workers, and to look after those for whom prevention options are long past.

I'm honoured to join you today on Workers Memorial Day to acknowledge those thousands of workers who – whether they knew it or not - paid the ultimate price for the work that they did.

Let us learn from them so their sons and daughters do not follow in those terrible and anguished footsteps.