

EARLY DEATHS: MESOTHELIOMA REDUCED LIFE EXPECTANCY BY UP TO 30 YEARS: STORIES OF WOMEN AND MEN

6th of December 2021 Eternit Trial Hearing

by

Silvana Mossano



The causal link between exposure to asbestos and lung cancer has been known for almost a hundred years. In science, reports of an association between exposure to the fibre and lung cancers were first published in the 1930s, and in the 1940s the association with pleural mesothelioma became clearly understood. In 1949, the Journal of the American Medical Association reported an incidence of lung cancer in asbestos patients 14 times higher than in the general population.

These were the first words of the plaintiffs’ expert witnesses, Dr Pietro Gino Barbieri, occupational physician (former director of the Prevention and Safety Service of Brescia’s Health Service District and head of the Malignant Mesothelioma Registry of the Province of Brescia, author of numerous publications and expert witness, especially for the prosecution in various trials) and Professor Mauro Giulio Papotti, internationally renowned pathologist (Chair of Pathological Anatomy at the University of Turin and Director of the Pathology Department of the Turin Molinette General Hospital).



Pietro Gino Barbieri and Mauro Giulio Papotti, expert witnesses for the plaintiffs (*parties civiles*)

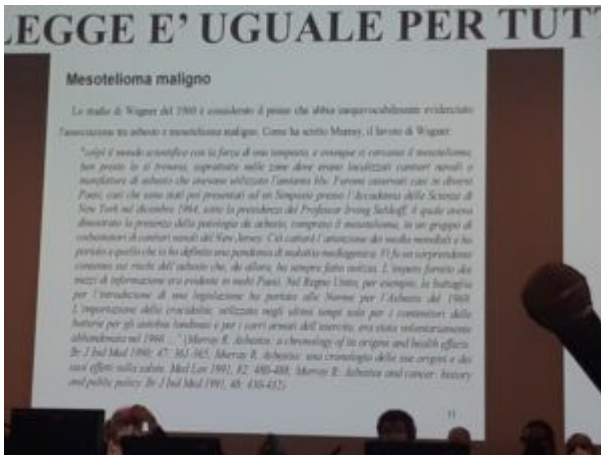
Drs Barbieri and Papotti examined 30 of the 392 cases listed in the Eternit Bis trial, people who died of mesothelioma and whose families are with lawyers Laura D'Amico, Maurizio Riverditi, Esther Gatti, Paolo Liedholm and Enrico Brunoldi. The detailed analysis of each life, of each medical history - through health records and exposure conditions – fully confirmed the conclusions of the Public Prosecution’s experts illustrated during past hearings: all died of mesothelioma.



Laura D’Amico

WAGNER TOOK THE SCIENTIFIC WORLD BY STORM

Asbestos has been known to cause respiratory cancer for decades. “Chris Wagner's 1960 study - explained Professor Barbieri, - is considered to be the first to have proved the association between asbestos and malignant mesothelioma". He quoted a passage by scientist Robert Murray, which caused quite a stir when read in court: Wagner's work he said struck the scientific world with the strength of a storm, and wherever you looked for mesothelioma you found asbestos, especially in areas where there were shipyards or asbestos factories that had used blue asbestos. The Eternit factory in Casale, which operated between 1907 and 1986, used blue asbestos (crocidolite) extensively, especially to build large pipes.



We are all equal in the eyes of the law

Subsequently, the 1964 International Symposium of the New York Academy of Sciences, organised by Irving Selikoff and Jacob Churg, **confirmed not only that asbestos causes lung cancer and mesothelioma of the pleura and peritoneum, but also that the risk of developing mesothelioma is present both for workers and in the community exposed to the airborne fibres circulating around industrial sites where asbestos is used in production.**

At that Symposium, Professor Enrico Vigliani (Italy's most authoritative Occupational Health Expert at the time, Director of the Milan Occupational Medicine Department and several times president of the Italian Society of Occupational Medicine) and Professor Giacomo Mottura (a then world-famous pathologist, a pneumoconiosis expert) presented the case history of mesotheliomas in Piedmont, Liguria and Lombardy between 1943 and 1964: 172 deaths from asbestos-related diseases recognised by the Workers' Compensation Agency (INAIL).

THE INDUSTRIALISTS KNEW

Was this knowledge exclusively limited to the academic world? Was it only the scientists that knew that asbestos causes mesothelioma, inside and outside factories? No.

In 1968, the afore mentioned Professor Vigliani had **not only written scientific papers and given presentations but was also called as a consultant by industry and had illustrated the carcinogenicity of asbestos, and of crocidolite in particular.**

Inevitably, this led to Neuss conference (Switzerland) in June 1976, in which, as reported by the two experts, "the Eternit group, in the person of Stephan Schmidheiny ¹ took note of the risk of the onset of malignant mesothelioma in the production of asbestos cement". More precisely, documents, correspondence and direct testimony, already presented at the previous Eternit proceedings (held in Turin, for wilful disaster) and now also in this trial, the so-called Eternit Bis, have shown that the Swiss entrepreneur was aware of the carcinogenicity of asbestos. He employed communication experts with the task of promoting mystifying and misleading information on the real dangers of the fibre.

¹ the only defendant in the Eternit Bis trial, for the death of 392 people from Casale and the surrounding towns who died of mesothelioma

DIAGNOSIS WITH IMMUNOHISTOCHEMISTRY

However, are we sure that all 392 cases are mesotheliomas? Because - this is one of the defence's theses - cases not corroborated by immuno-histochemistry tests (and, moreover, performed according to certain reactions) are to be considered doubtful. In their opinion, they have to be delisted.

The prosecutors' experts have already stated and repeated on Monday 6 by Professor Papotti: "The diagnosis of mesothelioma was made with certainty even when immuno-histochemistry was not commonly used. This means the diagnosis is reliable even when there were no immuno-histochemical tests". Furthermore as was stated by pathologist Dr Donata Bellis, the PPs' expert witness, in a previous hearing, a diagnosis of mesothelioma is not enough, and you need a multidisciplinary approach, based on the intersection of different investigations (X-ray, CT, cytological analysis of pleural fluid, thoracoscopy with biopsy, needle biopsy, thoracotomy, pleurectomy and decortication, plus immuno-histochemical investigations), 'and, as Prof Papotti pointed out, 'the entire diagnosis, perhaps because of the patient's age or particularly complex clinical conditions, cannot always be comprehensively be carried out. This notwithstanding a correct and certain diagnosis can be performed'.

THIRTY CASES

Dr Barbieri and Prof Papotti verified the accuracy of the 30 mesothelioma diagnoses that they were asked to examine, both by analysing the medical records and by examining the context - professional, family, environmental – where the people lived. Why thirty? Because these are the cases where the victim's families are represented by lawyers D'Amico, Riverditi, Gatti, Liedholm and Brunoldi, as well as Afeva, Cgil (Union) Piemonte and Alessandria that are also parties to the case.



The level of exposure," said Dr Barbieri, "was very high: what happened in Casale has no comparison in Italy. The occupational physician referred to numerous epidemiological studies by doctors Terracini, Magnani, Mirabelli, Bertolone, Bertolotti, Airoidi, Ferrante, Ivaldi and others.

The two expert witnesses explained what the type of exposure each case had undergone with reference to their specific field of expertise referring exposures to work, family, residence, and if and how the combination had occurred (family and environmental, for example).

In conclusion, of the thirty cases examined, fifteen only had environmental exposure; nine had both environmental and family exposure; two had both occupational (they worked at Eternit) and environmental exposure; four had both environmental and 'possible occupational' exposure (i.e. they worked in sectors where asbestos was present, albeit not as a raw material).

EARLY DEATHS

Barbieri and Papotti also stressed, in each case, exposure led to early death, cutting life short, even drastically. 'In Piedmont,' they explained, 'average life expectancy is 82.8 years for women and 78.4 years for men'. What do the victims' files tell us? That, for example, Paolo Ferraris died at age of 49, that is his life expectancy was cut short by more than 29 years. Basically, if he had not breathed in asbestos, he could have lived at least thirty years longer. Likewise, Sergio Possedel died at the age of 54, so his life expectancy was cut short by 24 years, Maria Paola Granziero, who died at 61, by 21 years, Rosanna Puzzo, who died at the age of 64, by 18 years, Giuseppe Lupano, who died at the age of 63, by 15 years, and Adriana Daniotti and Graziella Martinelli, who both died at the age of 66, by 16 years. And on and on for the cases examined by the expert witnesses.



Lawyer Riverditi, also on behalf of colleagues D'Amico, Gatti, Liedholm and Brunoldi, asked the experts if it was possible to establish a causal link between the exposures that caused those mesotheliomas and the period in which the Swiss entrepreneur managed Eternit, between 1976 and 1986, could be established. The expert witnesses pointed out that, while the occupational exposure of those who had worked at Eternit was specifically assessed in that decade, the environmental exposure went well beyond 1986. In fact, after the closure of the plant, the owners (i.e. Schmidheiny) did nothing to eliminate or contain the spread of the fibres: the plant in Via Oggero, Ronzone, abandoned to weather and decay, was reclaimed years later with public initiative and expenditure.

NEXT HEARING

At the next hearing on Monday, 13 December, Schmidheiny's defence attorneys - Astolfo Di Amato and Guido Carlo Alleva - will finish the cross-examination of the prosecutor's expert witnesses Doctors Massimiliano Bugiani, Ferruccio Perrelli and Pavilio Piccioni, Corrado Magnani and

Dario Mirabelli. On Monday 20 December, as well as genetic experts Irma Dianzani, also an expert witness for the prosecution, Edoardo Bai, an epidemiologist listed as an expert by lawyer Laura Mara for Medicina Democratica. Cross-examination of experts Papotti and Barbieri is scheduled for Monday 10 January.

<https://www.silmos.it/morti-anzitempo-il-mesotelioma-ha-soffocato-la-speranza-di-vita-anche-con-un-anticipo-di-30-anni/>