



Asbestos Council of Victoria



Office:
41 Monash Road
Newborough, Vic. 3825

Postal Address:
ACV/GARDS INC.
P.O. Box 111
Moe, Vic. 3825

Ph: 03 5127 7744 (24/7)
Fax: 03 5126 0354
Email: info@gards.org
Web: www.gards.org
ABN: 77 687 118 554
Inc. # A0042386U

14th July 2017

Senate Standing Committee on Economics
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
Email: economics.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Senators and Committee

Subject: Importation of Asbestos products: Community Support and Advocacy Group

Thank you for enabling us to speak before the Inquiry – My name is Vicki Hamilton I am the CEO/Secretary of Asbestos Council of Victoria/GARDS Inc. I have seen two of my family members pass away with asbestos disease.

Brief Background on our organisation - Asbestos Council of Victoria/ Gippsland Asbestos Related Diseases Support Inc. (ACV/GARDS Inc.) is a unique non-profit, non-government, voluntary organisation dedicated to supporting asbestos sufferers and their families. ACV/GARDS also works to raise the level of asbestos awareness in the community, industry and at all levels of government.

ACV/GARDS commenced in 1991 and is the largest asbestos support group in Victoria, the day to day running of the organisation is done by volunteers and one full time paid worker.

We are situated in the Latrobe Valley, where power industry workers contracted mesothelioma at seven times the state average. Over 140,000 Latrobe Valley power station workers were exposed to asbestos between the 1920s and 1980s. The legacy of this exposure continues today and ACV/GARDS are the sole support group in this region, who advocate on behalf of the workers, wives and children who are affected with asbestos disease. We are now increasingly seeing more people diagnosed with asbestos disease through home renovations and incidental exposure. At any one time over the year we have between 20 - 30 mesothelioma sufferers and their families on our books plus 60 sufferers of asbestosis, lung cancer and pleural plaques. Our concern is that people are unwittingly exposing themselves to asbestos through products they buy on line or purchase at a retailer. We need to stop the tsunami of asbestos products coming into our country or exposure in this manner will never end. Remember there is no safe level of exposure to asbestos fibres.

Main arguments

1. Biggest concern we believe is the inability of Australian Government Authorities to prevent the importation of illegal products and the unwillingness of our system to prosecute those who have flouted our laws. Ignorance is not an excuse – unsuspecting people will die as a result of these actions. Importers have got the responsibility to make sure that what they are importing complies with our Australian laws. By prosecution we mean large penalties – because the penalties that have been dealt in the last few years are very few and very minimal in monetary value – thus

importers are willing to take the risk of being caught as they know the prosecution will be minor and will not really effect their business. E.g. 24,000 Great Wall Cars & utes and also Chery's imported to Australia in 2012 – these vehicles should have been replaced with asbestos free vehicles and all of the 24,000 should have gone back to place of origin. It would have removed the entire asbestos problem. And sent a clear message to Chinese exporters.

2. Foreign companies exporting asbestos products to Australia – those companies should be required to take back the products that they have fraudulently said complied with Australian laws – this would certainly create awareness in other countries that if they are found to be signing off products that are asbestos free then they will be returned at the importers expense. Ignorance is no excuse.
3. On line purchasing through Gum tree, Amazon, eBay and other sites where Australians shop on line for overseas items – Australian authorities should have a dedicated unit set up to addressing on line purchasing. This unit should be testing and writing reviews on products that don't comply with Australian standards. Warnings on lists of what these products are so that the general public are educated to find out what the product they are buying is made of. E.g. asbestos yarn / threads, crayons, science kits, health stones, brakes, gaskets. E.g. Gas masks imported into Australia in the last couple of years tested for asbestos – found to have asbestos filters etc. – (some samples presented to this inquiry today) If these products are purchased by someone in Australia that is on the banned list then it should be confiscated and fine administered to purchaser.
4. Since submitting our submission in December, 2016 - 13,000 Polaris Quad bikes – 12 models – manufactured between 2001 – 2017 - been identified in the last couple of months as having asbestos brake pads, brake shoes, washers and gaskets in them. Also recently in the last month dozens of brakes for heavy machinery in Latrobe Valley have been found to have asbestos in them **they were manufactured and imported from Europe** *(the raw materials used to make these brakes were reportedly sourced from Italy and France)*. In the last 6 months gaskets purchased for machinery in Latrobe Valley tested positive for asbestos (samples presented to this inquiry). The list is endless. This is just the tip of the iceberg.

Summary: we banned asbestos in 2003 but products containing asbestos have been flowing into our country with no checks – we were foolish enough to think we could pass laws and everyone would obey them - no one thought to do regular checks on products after the ban was initiated. We have only realised in recent times just how much asbestos is in products and how varied those products and wide ranging – effecting all Australians from the very young to the old. If it was not for the efforts of a few determined groups to highlight this enormous issue we would not even be talking about it.

A point to remember Companies/Australians who have purchased plant equipment and vehicles that contain asbestos - is it legal to resell E.g. Great Wall cars etc. as currently our law prevents the import, reuse or on selling of products containing asbestos?

Are we breaking our own laws?

Compiled by:
Vicki Hamilton OAM
CEO/Secretary
Asbestos Council of Victoria/GARDS Inc.
14/7/2017

There is no safe level of exposure to asbestos fibres.