

Fighting the killer fibre

HANS GROOTEGOED tells of the work his father, Ed, has done on behalf of asbestos victims.

On April 9 my father *Arie (Ed) Grootegoed* was awarded the Air New Zealand Lifetime Achievement Award at the New Zealand Workplace Health and Safety Awards dinner – an overwhelming and completely unexpected honour.

Dad has spent a lifetime dealing with asbestos – first as a plumber and heating engineer doing construction and maintenance work at hospitals in Dunedin, Wellington and Auckland, and later as the secretary of the Asbestos Diseases Association of New Zealand.

Ed immigrated to New Zealand from the Netherlands in 1952, after four years military service in Indonesia.

Encounter with asbestos

His first job in New Zealand was as a forestry worker in Otago, using Clydesdale horses to haul timber. He didn't stay in this job for long, however, because his family had been plumbers since the 1860s and he wanted to get into this line of work.

His first plumbing job was in Dunedin, with a large plumbing and heating contractor that did all the work for Otago and Southland Hospital Board.

This job mainly involved renewing sinks and benches, fixing plumbing and heating, and working on hospital extensions around the Otago region. He spent more than three years on the new Waikare Hospital project, installing plumbing, heating, chlorifiers, and the steam mains to the hospital. It was here that Ed had his first experience of asbestos, when he was installing pipe lagging.

For the next eight years Ed worked in and around Dunedin, before moving to Wellington for two years, and finally settling in Auckland in 1962.

After Ed retired, he was diagnosed with a mild asbestos-related illness.

Lois and Ed

Dad met his best friend and partner, *Lois Syret*, on Anzac Day, 1988. Sadly, she passed away last year.

Lois was a gentle and intelligent person, who worked as a secretary in medical universities and hospitals, and for legal and medical professionals and consultants in both Australia and New Zealand.

In 1975 she became office manager and secretary to the manager of the Northern Electrical Workers Union, and completed 14 years service before her retirement in 1989.

This work background stood her in good stead when, after her retirement, she accepted a voluntary job as secretary for the Asbestos Diseases Association of New Zealand. She was a natural for the job, having both the knowledge and skill to write reports, submissions and legal documents, and the people skills to counsel and support asbestos victims and their families. Together Lois and Ed bought a strong combination of compassion and a desire for justice to their work with the association.

Counselling and campaigning

Over the years Lois and Ed helped many people. Lois was excellent at talking with, and counselling, victims, but also helped them fill in forms for compensation or prepare legal documents.

Ed spent countless hours researching asbestos and became an ardent campaigner, speaking out against the gross unfairness of the compensation system and the lack of education to inform people about the risks of asbestos contamination and safe removal practices.

He believes New Zealand lags significantly behind other developed nations because of its acceptance of the asbestos danger, the true disease rate



Ed Grootegoed (right) with 'special grand-daughter' Jessica Clark and son Hans.

in our population, the lack of fair compensation to victims and families, and the long-term management of asbestos in our environment.

International congress

In 2000, Ed was asked to present a report about asbestos in New Zealand to the International Ban Asbestos Secretariat's Global Asbestos Congress in Brazil. He spent six days mixing with world experts from both the legal and medical fraternities, and brought back a wealth of material and documentation, which now fills his large home library.

In 2004, Lois's health started to decline and she could no longer keep up her work for the Asbestos Diseases Association. Luckily she had taught her skills in compiling booklets, reports and documents to her special 'granddaughter', *Jessica Clark*.

Jessica is the daughter of a family that Lois and Ed took under their wing after the father died from asbestosis in 2002, and now it is Jessica who types all the association's material.

The fight goes on

Although he is now 82, Ed has not given up his work. He be-

lieves that a global epidemic of asbestos disease is possible. No country in the world is exempt because asbestos use was so heavy in the past and, as a mineral, asbestos does not break down.

Over the years many reports and letters have been sent to various government departments in New Zealand, trying to change both the compensation system and the control of asbestos. At the same time, Lois and Ed talked to hundreds of asbestos victims and family members, sharing with them in the tragedies that asbestos had brought them.

Ed hopes his lifetime achievement award will make more people aware of the situation facing asbestos victims, and that things will be done to help them, to increase community awareness of the problem, and to improve legislative controls on asbestos. ■

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