

In Memoriam

Nancy Tait

Nancy Tait was a remarkable woman. Nothing in her upbringing or early career presaged the emergence of a grassroots activist; that she became one was due almost entirely to the “completely unscrupulous and ruthless” response of the authorities to her husband Bill’s asbestos cancer, mesothelioma. At a time when occupational illness was an accepted fact of life, she had the temerity to insist that Bill’s death from mesothelioma (1968) be officially recognized. Throughout her prolonged interaction with officials from the Post Office (Bill’s former employer), her tenacity, methodical nature, and intelligence overcame a succession of bureaucratic obstacles. Four years after Mr. Tait died, the state-owned company was forced to acknowledge that it had indeed been responsible for exposing the telecommunications engineer to the hazardous substance which caused his death at 61 years of age.

Historian Geoffrey Tweedale described the years to come:

Angered by the struggle for compensation and the apparent ignorance and secrecy of the authorities and the asbestos industry, Nancy Tait began her own research into asbestos diseases and began campaigning on behalf of sick workers and their relatives. . . . Nancy’s special quality seems to have been that she would never give up and was always prepared to write that extra letter or make that extra phone call; she had the patience to take on the medical profession, the government and the industrial establishment at their own game by submerging herself (with the help of others) in the legalities and technicalities of any problem (*personal communication*).

In 1978, Nancy founded the Society for the Prevention of Asbestosis and Industrial Diseases (SPAID), which was later renamed the Occupational and Environmental Diseases Association (OEDA). Working with SPAID staff, Nancy became the world’s first citizens’ champion for the rights of asbestos victims. As the SPAID representative, she provided practical assistance for the injured as they attempted to traverse the bureaucratic minefield. Appearing at countless coroner’s inquests, she supported grieving relatives whose loved ones had died from asbestos disease: thousands of lost husbands, wives, mothers, fathers. On many occasions, she crossed swords with industry spokesmen and industry-friendly experts; often, it was her evidence that was accepted.

In the booklet *Asbestos Kills*, which Nancy published in 1976, she highlighted the hazards of all types of asbestos, including chrysotile; noted the under-recording of asbestos deaths; and criticized the inadequate compensation awarded to asbestos victims. Industry representatives were appalled at the ructions the former civil servant was causing, with a spokesman for one asbestos trade body in 1976 referring to “a woman called Nancy Tait (who) has been campaigning for more information . . . you can see a lot of fresh problems are coming up.” Mrs. Tait was certainly one of the “fresh problems.” UK asbestos leaders such as Turner & Newall, Cape PLC, and British Belting Asbestos all experienced the inconvenience of being the focus of Mrs. Tait’s attention.

More than twenty years before the UK banned chrysotile (white) asbestos, Nancy warned that:

the dangers of white asbestos are seriously underestimated in this

country. Too often one hears from industry, local authorities, fire prevention officers, unions, general practitioners, contractors and their operatives in the media: ‘it is only white asbestos.’

In a letter published in *The New Statesman* on September 9, 1982, she warned of the pervasive nature of the coming asbestos epidemic:

SPAID’s work shows that cancer, especially mesothelioma, attacks those with slight, short and/or intermittent exposure to asbestos. . . . The people dying from mesothelioma who we are trying to help at the present time include dockers, electricians, carpenters and roofers working with asbestos cement, oil blenders and workers in the chemical industry, many with very slight exposures to white asbestos. . . .

Nancy picked up on the epidemiological trends well before statisticians and government bureaucrats; the “experts,” who frequently rubbished her findings, were eventually forced to admit she was right.

Consultant physician and Co-director of St. Bart’s Mesothelioma Research Unit, Dr. Robin Rudd first met Mrs. Tait at the London Chest Hospital in 1983:



Nancy Tait

[Mrs. Tait's] prime interest in the 1980s was the need to get benefits to people suffering from asbestos-related diseases. The expertise she accumulated during her husband's case was used to good effect in her effort to force government agencies to simplify rules for benefits and eliminate the need for superfluous medical examinations. Observing that some experts were using the results of electron microscopy to compromise compensation applications, she decided that SPAID needed its own electron microscope. To acquire such an expensive piece of equipment was no easy feat for a small charity but with her usual quiet determination and ferocious work ethic, SPAID acquired an electron microscope. SPAID technicians used this high-powered piece of kit to issue reports used as evidence in court proceedings. Nancy Tait was a unique individual of unquestioned skill and commitment; she was much respected by all of us working in this field and will be much missed (*personal communication*).

In the group's heyday, the OEDA offices in Enfield were bustling with clerical staff and lab technicians. The work they produced was used to good advantage in cases brought by asbestos victims and for numerous submissions to government enquiries, briefings for Members of Parliament, and opinion papers for bodies such as the Industrial Injuries Advisory Council. Even when the OEDA offices closed down (2008), Nancy did not retire—woe betide the person who said that she had! During the second half of her life Nancy went from being a “meddling amateur,” as one asbestos defendant described her, to being a highly-esteemed national figure receiving an MBE in 1996 and an honorary doctorate from the University of Southampton in 1999. Four years ago, the Sypol Lifetime Achievement Award was presented to Nancy by the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health.

Reflecting on the sad news of Nancy's death, Solicitor John Pick-

ering, who had known her for more than 30 years, remarked:

What I remember most was her messianic fervour on behalf of asbestos victims and her single-minded pursuit of their cause; small talk was not engaged in with Nancy, you either contributed to her store of information on asbestos or you sought her help, always willingly given.

To the thousands of asbestos injured people in the UK who needed help she possessed the inestimable quality that the advice she provided was free of cost. Nancy was uncorrupted and incorruptible. Her death is the end of an era. But it may not be the end of the story of asbestos disease here. The government has invited the USA and France to send their old asbestos-riddled warships here for scrapping. It is conceivable that the work will be carried out safely but I fear in 30 years time mesothelioma cases will begin to appear around Hartlepool and the country will look for another Nancy Tait to fight for the victims (*personal communication*).

Nancy Tait was a pioneer in the field of asbestos victims' rights, having devised many of the practices and arguments still being used today. She was a resolute champion of those disadvantaged by asbestos disease and a fierce opponent of corporate skulduggery and government flimflam. Ironically, the destructive forces which created this “accidental activist” helped make Britain a better place.

LAURIE KAZAN-ALLEN

Henri Pezerat

The death of toxicologist Henri Pezerat came unexpectedly on February 16, 2009. For over 35 years, Henri had sought to make the French government, trade unions, and public aware of the horrific legacy asbestos had left in his country. His work was ignored, ridi-

culed, and sometimes dismissed as the ravings of a leftist troublemaker. The massive propaganda campaign waged by vested interests in France, orchestrated by the Permanent Asbestos Committee (CPA), neither dissuaded him nor deterred him from his course. The scientific papers he published were the lifeblood of the ban asbestos movement; they contained the data and facts to combat the lies being told by industry.

As a scientist, Henri realized that he had to respond to social needs and issues of public health. Consequently, he changed the emphasis of his work and started to research the toxicity of asbestos and other fibers. This new direction went against the scientific climate of the time. French scientists were encouraged by the infamous CPA to favor the asbestos industry position; many well-known names were employed as consultants by the asbestos lobbyists. In the end, however, Henri's international reputation and the solid scientific arguments he advanced obliged others to engage with the ban asbestos debate. Henri's work continued to the end of his life; a paper he wrote, “Chrysotile Biopersistence: The Misuse of Biased Studies,” was published in the previous issue of *IJOEH*. This concise and cogent analysis which focused on the work of Dr. David Bernstein, a Switzerland-based toxicologist often commissioned by the asbestos industry, is a credit not only to Henri's intellectual capabilities, which never diminished, but also to his determination to expose the “lack (of) scientific rigor and credibility” which characterizes the work of industry-linked “experts.”

In 1975, Henri coordinated the first asbestos actions at Jussieu University (Campus Universitaire de Jussieu); these included strikes, assemblies, and negotiations on the huge Paris campus. He was the first one to realize the colossal scale of the problem at the site, where sprayed asbestos insulation had been used extensively. As a scien-

tist, he understood that, like the insulators who applied the fire-proofing to the steel structure during its construction, the Jussieu students would pay a price for their hazardous exposures to this toxic substance. Knowing that the student protests were unlikely to succeed on their own, Henri built alliances with trade unions and workers at the Ferodo and Amisol asbestos factories. Their joint protests resulted in the first French legislation against asbestos.

Henri studied many aspects of the French asbestos catastrophe and was deeply concerned about rising mesothelioma mortality and the lack of compensation for victims. He continuously criticized the industry fallacy of the “controlled use” of asbestos, which many well-known French scientists hid behind. He was a scathing critic of the government’s selective blindness when it came to asbestos issues. Frequent contact with former asbestos factory workers from Amisol and other asbestos-exposed workers gave rise to the idea of forming a local association against asbestos. This was to eventually grow into ANDEVA, the social movement which represents French asbestos victims. The coalition of grass roots activists, workers, trade unions, students, and others who campaigned about asbestos brought immense pressure on the French government. As a result, the government was forced to acknowledge its responsibilities, the CPA

was disbanded, and a unilateral ban on asbestos was introduced in France. The French asbestos ban was of immense importance as it eventually led to the European Union asbestos ban implemented by Commission Directive 1999/77/EC adopted in July 1999.

Henri’s involvement was pivotal in the efforts to build the international ban asbestos movement; he attended the conferences in Milan (1993) and Sao Paulo (1994) which laid the groundwork for this global movement. His ability and willingness to review supposedly independent academic papers written under the influence of the industry were invaluable. He was generous with his time and always responded to requests from individuals or the relatives of individuals who had been injured by asbestos exposures. When a gap was identified in the social landscape which required the establishment of a new campaigning group—Ban Asbestos France—Henri, once again, become a founding member. As Henri made a friend of the media, asbestos issues found their way onto the pages of *Le Monde* and other leading publications.

On August 30, 2000, Henri Pezerat’s work was recognized at a ceremony held at the Paris headquarters of ANDEVA where, among family and friends, I was thrilled to present him with the June Hancock Award, named after a courageous Englishwoman who died from



Henri Pezerat

mesothelioma. After the ceremony, we adjourned to the garden of Annie Thebaud-Mony, Henri’s devoted companion. With much laughter, some delicious food, and even more delicious wine, we reveled in the pleasure of the day’s events and enjoyed Henri’s company and friendship.

Henri Pezerat was an open-hearted and generous man with keen intellectual capabilities. A toxicologist who accepted his civic responsibility, he was uncompromising in his condemnation of those scientists who put their services on offer to the highest bidder. Although the campaigns Henri helped establish will persist, he will be sorely missed.

Laurie Kazan-Allen