

MOBILIZATION OF JAPANESE
ASBESTOS VICTIMS

Since her husband died of asbestos-related lung cancer (2001), Mrs. Kazuko Furukawa has become known throughout Japan for her tireless campaigning on behalf of asbestos victims. She now knows what she did not know when doctors first informed the couple of Yukio Furukawa's diagnosis. At that time, neither one of them had heard of asbestos or knew of the link between asbestos and cancer. Ms. Furukawa says:



"My life has completely changed since my husband died. I spend much of my time traveling throughout Japan to assist other asbestos victims. My husband was exposed to asbestos at the power station where he worked as a welder... Since he died, I have been fighting against asbestos. At the beginning of my struggle against asbestos I was lonely. I started to apply for Workers Accident Compensation Insurance (WACI) but it took a long time to get the application approved. I faced various difficulties. While I was applying for WACI, I came to realize that he had been working in such dangerous and terrible surroundings. They didn't receive safety instructions at the workplace and moreover they were not provided with ventilation systems and personal protective gear."

Working with others whose lives had been affected by asbestos, Ms. Furukawa was a founding member of the Japan Association of Mesothelioma and Asbestos-Related Diseases Victims (the Association), an umbrella group which ensures that local victims' groups and campaigning NGOs have a national presence in the asbestos debate. The Association was founded on February 7, 2004 to spread awareness of asbestos-related diseases and provide a forum for information exchange amongst the injured and their family members to combat the depression, loneliness and isolation an asbestos diagnosis brings.

The experience of the Association's members differs widely; some are ill for years with varying levels of disability and others die within six

months of diagnosis. Medical treatment includes: operations, chemotherapy, drugs, the use of folk remedies and palliative care. The average age of victims is getting younger with some in their 30s and 40s; although most asbestos exposure is occupational, there are many cases of non-occupational and environmental exposure.

The cases which follow illustrate the personal asbestos tragedies which are all too common in Japan. Just before his death in September 2004, 65 year old Tokuo Kato wrote:

"Two years have passed since I started suffering from malignant pleural mesothelioma. As the disease progressed I grew distressed in many ways. At first I was confused, later my mind felt blank when my doctor informed me that there was no treatment. I had many sleepless nights. It was just like being kicked when I was already down.

Around 40 years ago I worked as a welder at a boiler manufacturing company. The reason for my illness was asbestos exposure in those days. I contracted this disease through no fault of my own. I feel very sorry that I have to die of this with no cure in sight. Before I was diagnosed, I had no information about mesothelioma. One day I learned about the existence of an 'asbestos hot-line' while watching TV. I called in and learned it was possible to apply for workers' compensation. A half year later, thanks to the help of the hotline workers, I qualified for the workers' compensation. The notification letter was quite simple but it gave me a great sense of relief.

Until then I was given anticancer drugs and visited hospital repeatedly. I really feel in my body that my condition is getting worse day by day and would like to take effective medicine as soon as possible. This is a natural desire, as a patient. In the past, we didn't know about the dangers of asbestos and inhaled it. But, now we know that asbestos is a carcinogen. No more victims like myself. This is another one of my wishes."

Fumitoshi Saito, Rapporteur of the Association, worked as an electrician on houses, shops and factories

from the 1970s; he used several types of asbestos boards and was neither warned about the hazards nor given protective equipment. Mr. Saito (69) was diagnosed with lung cancer in 1998 and had an operation to remove part of his right lung; asbestos fibers were found in the removed section. Currently, he has a cough, experiences difficulty in breathing and pain around the scar when the temperature or humidity change. After a home-interview in 2002 by a doctor and nurse, he became aware for the first time that his condition might be due to asbestos exposure. With help from the Tokyo Occupational Safety and Health Center he succeeded in obtaining workers' compensation. Mr. Saito is proud that the Association is creating opportunities for victims and their families to share their problems and concerns. "I was ignorant about asbestos," he says "and now I try to inform asbestos victims all over the nation about asbestos, particularly about diagnosis, treatment, care for families and compensation."

The asbestos death of her husband on March 26, 1998, shattered a lifetime of dreams and hopes for his widow Mrs. Kaeko Omori. Working in power stations belonging to Tokyo Electric Company for eighteen years brought Kunio Omori into contact with a range of asbestos materials. The original diagnosis made of his condition was lung cancer; this was, Mrs. Omori said, bad enough but a second opinion was even worse: malignant mesothelioma. The company which originally denied Mrs. Omori's application for compensation finally relented after the involvement of the Tokyo Occupational Safety and Health Center. Mrs. Omori finds it hard to accept that the company never apologized for exposing Mr. Omori to the asbestos which killed him. She said:

"My husband and I had planned to travel around Japan after his retirement but our dream failed to come true. I don't think my husband died. He was killed by the company and the Government."

When the family of Mr. Saito realize that he would never recover from the illness which had hospitalized him, they brought him home. As his condition worsened, more painkill-

ers were needed to bring the pain under control. When the pain finally subsided, Ms. Saito and her sister asked their parents to tell them how they first met: "Which places did you go to on dates? How did you feel when we were born?" Ms. Saito asked.

"My father smiled happily when my sister thanked him for bringing us into this world. We had a blissful time remembering our happy life in the past."

"We will never accept the use of asbestos stole my father from us, and we will continue our activities so that there are no more asbestos victims like my father. My father and my family's struggle for a better society have just started."

Rinzo Uno, Secretary of the Association worked for 37 years building ships in the town of Yokosuka, 50 kilometers south of Tokyo. Throughout much of this time, he was required to remove asbestos by hand; masks were not provided until 1978. He has been involved in activities to raise awareness of pneumoconiosis for twenty years and was a founding member of the new Japanese asbestos victims' association. Fifteen years ago, he was diagnosed with pneumoconiosis; he described the effects it has on his life as follows:

"I usually have 4 coughing fits every night. Since my coughs are very close together, I can't ingest any medicines. My wife rubs my back and sometimes asks me if we should call an ambulance but I am not able to reply during a fit. During my two-hour fit, she just watches me and I feel more dead than alive. Actually, it is not only pain but the struggle of my family. When I have a light fit while riding on a train, my neighbors sometimes change their seats. This makes me feel very lonely."

Mr. Uno deplores the passivity of the Japanese Government: "My friends are dying one after the other from mesothelioma and lung cancer. And I cannot forget for an instant that I also carry a time bomb of asbestos in my lungs."

Ms. Kazumi Yoshizaki agrees that the Association has a vital role to play in raising asbestos awareness in Japan; her father, who died from mesothelioma, had worked at the

Nichias Corporation factory in Oji, Japan. Since 1896, this company had been a respected manufacturer of thermal insulation materials in Japan. Unfortunately, their products used asbestos and many former employees, like Tadashi Yoshizaki, have paid the price for the company's negligent use of such a dangerous substance. Speaking in July 2006, Ms. Yoshizaki told delegates at an asbestos conference that she loved her father and hated asbestos and pledged that the Yoshizaki family would continue to campaign for a global asbestos ban and justice for all asbestos victims.

Nowadays there are 10 branches of the Association throughout Japan with nearly 400 members. Association representatives assist victims and their families by providing:

- ◆ a free telephone consultation service;
- ◆ assistance for patients in bringing compensation claims for occupational and non-occupational asbestos exposure;
- ◆ opportunities for victims, family members and bereaved relatives to get together to offer mutual support and advice;
- ◆ coordination of a national lobby for legislation to improve the plight of victims and their families.

The Association holds social events

such as picnics during the Cherry Blossom festival so that people marginalized by illness can be resocialized. In November 2004, the Association played a pivotal role in the organization of the Global Asbestos Congress (GAC 2004), which provided a wonderful opportunity for Japanese people to have face-to-face meetings with overseas experts, victims' representatives, victims and bereaved family members. Since then, the Association has sponsored a petition for the provision of basic rights for asbestos victims and for the creation of an asbestos-free society which attracted massive support. To draw attention to this document, the Association held meetings and a rally in Tokyo.

Turning adversity to advocacy, the members of the Japan Association of Mesothelioma and Asbestos-Related Diseases Victims have put their painful experiences to use by helping others whose lives are being destroyed by asbestos. They are there to listen to the fears, share the sadness and help ease the loneliness and isolation which follow in the wake of asbestos-related diseases. And, only a short time after the first international conference of asbestos victims took place in Asia, they have forced the Government to embark on the long process of tackling Japan's ill-advised use of asbestos.

