

Penrith resident Matthew O'Farrell condemns asbestos exposure

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Matthew O'Farrell spoke with the WSWs on June 11 about the exposure of his home to asbestos and how workers and residents have been treated by the corporations responsible for the installation of the National Broadband Network (NBN).

The manner in which these gentlemen [the sub-contractors] were working is what initially concerned me. I didn't realise that they were working on asbestos pits but after watching the way they were working on communications infrastructure, and knowing that they didn't speak English, I thought it deserved a little more professionalism. It was then that I went to Google in search of answers. I was most alarmed when I discovered that Telstra or its representatives would be removing concrete asbestos pits and replacing them with plastic pits in preparation for the NBN roll out.

I immediately rang WorkCover and they rang me back two-and-a-half to three days later, stating that my worst fears were correct. It was asbestos material and they [the contractors] had been shut down. They could not continue to do any work as they were working in the wrong manner, using incorrect procedures and no protection.

Asbestos fragments were broken up all over the grass adjacent to the pits, all over the nature strip, all over my lawns, over my driveway, all over my bins and all around the surrounding areas. Other pits were done in a similar manner. The gentlemen [the sub-contractors] were hitting them with sledgehammers, crowbars and pitchforks, so there was no control in the way they were doing this. It has endangered not only us and our street, but all local residents.

Telstra didn't offer [alternative] accommodation until 18 days after the initial exposure. The areas weren't even cordoned off, fenced, nor signed for 14 days after WorkCover discovered the presence of a material they

believed to be asbestos.

Service Stream was the Telstra contractor, and they sub-contracted the work. That is where all procedures failed. The workers obviously weren't trained. People should have no confidence whatsoever in Telstra. They continue to allow people who have done things wrongly in the past to remain working for them. They show no respect, and give us no trust or confidence in anything that they are doing. To let the same contractor back into the street to try to clean up the work is just disgusting.

I have a 13-week-old, who was 9 weeks old when we were first exposed. I found asbestos fragments in my shoes four or five days after work commenced. I had been in my car, my house, the gym, my grandparents' and my mother's with these shoes on. My 9-week-old at the time was rolling around on the floor with my 6-year-old. I'm just waiting. Hopefully they don't get sick, but you never know. Quite simply, this is going to haunt me for the next 20 or 30 years.

Absolutely no prior warning was given, informing us that asbestos-related work was being conducted in our local area. If we had been notified, more than likely I would have moved us out for a day or two until the work was completed. I would have locked up my house and most certainly not left doors or windows open. I definitely wouldn't have been happy to let my wife walk to the bin with a nappy bag and our baby in her arms. This was all exposure that was unnecessary. At no time was anything displayed that made us aware that asbestos work was being carried out.

There are another 20 sites outside our street, in the surrounding area, which still display fencing and signs saying "danger asbestos." We ordered Telstra to do this and it took over 20 days before they bordered off the other sites. They've given no-one any confidence in

them because these signs are still up. No-one has confirmed if the sites do or do not contain asbestos. We haven't heard back from any specialist to tell us that this site is, or is not, clear. If your company had exposed people to asbestos, you presumably wouldn't leave signs up stating that there was asbestos remaining in the area if it was, in fact, all clear.

They're not being truthful with the public. Councils also need to heighten public awareness. Australia Post won't even deliver to our street or surrounding streets where these pits are located and signs have been erected. The council and the mayor, however, have failed to put up any signs, fence off any areas, nature strips or demand urgent remediation from Telstra.

The remediation plan we have put forward to Telstra is inclusive of nature strips. It is the residents, the victims, who are putting forward this remediation plan and asking Telstra to remediate these nature strips and the area surrounding the pits.

The residents are tax-payers and rate-payers. They have a right to have safe land around their homes and deserve the right to walk around their houses and not drag asbestos into it.

Telstra is trying to rush everything. They are using people who are quite obviously not trained to do the job. When you've got gentlemen who don't speak English, how could you put them through an [asbestos handling] induction? They would have had to sign off to say what kind of work they were doing, but how could they sign off on something they didn't understand? I feel sorry for these gentlemen. Where is Telstra in all of this? They're not looking after the situation. It is just push, push, push, to get the work done and have the roll-out complete. But people don't want the NBN at the expense of everyone's health and well-being.

Until I put my head out there on the chopping block, no-one was coming forward. Now, people are coming out of the woodwork with new stories every day about what Telstra has or hasn't done. How long has this been kept quiet? They obviously knew about the pits that contained asbestos a long time ago.

Employees of Telstra and their contractors have been working in these pits for the past 20 or 30 years and have possibly been exposed. It is not just now. Even when the infrastructure was being put in, there could have been exposures.

People need to be aware and keep their eyes open. When they see something going on, or work not being conducted in the proper manner, or workers not adhering to safety measures, they need to speak up.



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