

In Detail... The Toxic Waste Scandal: BBC radio documentary details fight to expose truth behind UK birth defects scandal in Corby

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The BBC radio documentary *In Detail... The Toxic Waste Scandal* released March 4 deals with the cluster of birth defects in newborns in the town of Corby in Northamptonshire, England. The defects were a consequence of the negligent clean-up around 1983-1997 at the site of the former steelworks, which closed in 1981.

The documentary complements the Netflix series *Toxic Town*, which is streaming concurrently.

The Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher decimated the nationalised steel industry in the 1980s on the grounds of unprofitability. Thatcher's successor John Major (1990-1997) left local authorities, many of them controlled by the Labour Party, to deal with the decommissioning of up to 70 years of steel industry waste. Labour-run Corby Borough Council (CBC) planned to reclaim the 700-acre steelworks site and attract private capital to build a theme park and businesses.

With George Taylor narrating, one of the up to 30 or more children poisoned in the womb by contaminated waste from the steel plant, the programme unravels how the scandal was made possible.

George, now aged 32, tells the story through the real voices of the people who were there. From the moment mothers realised there was a community of children born with birth abnormalities, it was obvious something had gone terribly wrong. But it was not the authorities who stepped in to find the cause. In fact, CBC put every obstacle in the way of finding the truth. It was the mothers, their dedicated legal team, council whistleblowers Ted Jenkins and Sam Hagen that did that, and it took a 13-year battle.

The story first broke nationally, in a *Sunday Times* April 11, 1999 article headlined, "Birth defect cluster found near toxic dump". This alerted solicitor Des Collins that something big was happening. Listening to the mothers of the affected children persuaded Collins to begin litigation on

the grounds of negligence against Corby Council.

CBC responded by inviting the mothers to a public meeting in February 2000--called by the Regional Health Authority (RHA)--to report their investigation into the birth defects. The RHA denied the existence of a cluster, saying the incidence of defects in Corby was no higher than the surrounding Kettering area.

In her own voice, Lisa, whose daughter Simone was born with a hand defect recalls: "I asked at the meeting, 'What constitutes a cluster?'...What an absolute whitewash. I knew then we were in for a fight ...and they were going to make us look bad."

Collins reflects: "That was the first time I saw them [the mothers] all come together. They were quite appalled that evidence should be produced by the council and used to try and bring the case to an end. The arrogance, of putting them in the audience and telling them the case was no good!"

The callous message of the RHA to "Get on with your life" steeled the mothers for a fight.

The first challenge for the legal team was to investigate whether a cluster of birth defects existed.

Mathematician Dr. Tony Fox studied the data and realised the council had distorted the statistics. They compared the incidence of defects in Corby with Kettering and Corby, and not Kettering alone. But was the incidence high enough to constitute a cluster?

Collins consulted Professor of Epidemiology (incidence of disease in populations) Louise Parker at Newcastle University. She found, "The rate in Corby was not only high compared with Kettering, it was high compared with the rest of Europe."

George Taylor recounts his own journey, suffering terribly due to his hand deformity. During his last year at primary school, "the pain in my hand went mad." A swelling at the base of his index finger proved to be a tumour.

Aged 14, George underwent further surgery lasting a gruelling 13 hours, after another tumour developed in the palm of his hand.

“This kind of stuff happened to lots of us. We went under the knife, while our parents sat in cold grey corridors waiting for us.”

George today works as a civil servant, but he is in constant pain and has a 13cm tumour in his shoulder and hopes he won’t lose an arm.

George’s mother Fiona recalls feelings of guilt: “Why has it happened? ...What’s wrong with his hand. Is it something I’ve done, is it my fault... you look to blame yourself.”

Collins realised he had to find the agency by which the contaminants in the toxic waste entered the bodies of the pregnant women. It was the mothers who pointed him in the right direction.

They described how the lorries raced through the town carrying the steel waste, which slopped out onto the roads. The sludge dried out and covered the town periodically with an “atmospheric soup of toxic materials,” which the residents of Corby (population 60,000) breathed in.

George’s parents ran the King’s Arms pub near the clean-up site, serving the drivers who drove the lorries carrying the waste to landfill sites. The drivers came in covered with red dust. The dust spread on the tables, on the floor. George’s pregnant mother cleaned it up every night.

The mothers and their legal team gathered enough evidence to request the High Court pursue a class action against CBC, which they were granted in 2005, and as a result gained access to the council’s files.

It took 10 years for The Corby Group Litigation V Corby Borough Council legal case to open at the High Court in London, in February 2009.

While the council conceded that highly toxic cadmium was in the steel waste, they denied a link to the birth defects.

Consultant gynaecologist specialising in foetal medicine, Dr. David Penman, gave evidence. He declared that toxins such as cadmium found in the steel waste has been “shown in experimental animals to cause defects.” As to the likely route into the body, he suggested by inhalation.

Consulted again by Collins, Dr. Tony Cox, with a PHD in air pollution modelling, worked out that small particles of dust could travel in the air 3-4 kilometres, and was able to reach the mothers.

The legal defence for CBC countered with evidence that seemed to indicate the dust could not travel so far. With access to the council’s files, Dr. Fox realised they had based their contention on a German study in 1992 that missed a digit and reduced distance by times 10.

On July 29, 2009, the Hon. Mr Justice Akenhead found CBC “liable in negligence, public nuisance and a breach of

statutory duty for its reclamation of a Corby Steelworks ...1985 and 1997.”

CBC continued to deny the link between the clean-up and the birth defects. This was under a Labour government led by Tony Blair (1997-2007), committed to privatisation and profiteering. Profits were to be made from the land reclamation in Corby, and rumours of bribery in the tendering process were rife.

The CBC called an extraordinary public meeting to consult with the public as to whether they should appeal the court ruling. They declared council taxes would rise £25 each year over 20 years to pay the court costs, and asked the meeting whether they should continue to “fight on behalf of taxpayers as a whole?”

Lisa reflects bitterly: “You (CBC) just put all the blame back on us, so the Corby people are going to resent us, for the rest of our lives probably.”

George said: “It was suggested that the birth defects might merely reflect the fact that the lower social classes drink more, smoke more, and take more illegal drugs.”

CBC later decided to drop their appeal and made an out of court settlement in 2010 of £14.6 million with 18 families.

Episode eight of the series sits uncomfortably with the previous ones. It gives voice to two witnesses for the defence who cast doubt on the verdict, concluding that there was no cluster and the whole thing a mystery.

This contrasts miserably with the rest of the documentary, which details the incontrovertible evidence proving the negligence of Labour-run Corby Council in the 1980s led to a devastating cluster of birth defects. The mothers and their supporters were vindicated.



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