

ASBESTOS DISEASES

Statement

HON CHARLES SMITH (East Metropolitan) [5.29 pm]: As members may be aware, this week marks Asbestos Awareness Week, a particularly pertinent event in Western Australia given that we have the highest rate of asbestos-related diseases per capita in the world. The Asbestos Diseases Society of Australia states that there is no data to suggest that WA will not continue to experience significantly elevated rates of mesothelioma and other asbestos-linked diseases into the foreseeable future.

Most members will have some understanding of WA's asbestos disaster and its origins. WA's mining of blue asbestos began in the north west in the 1930s. It was not until the 1970s that it became apparent that asbestos exposure was creating a health crisis among workers who were employed in asbestos mining and associated industries, including the manufacture of materials that contained asbestos fibres. I am sure that most of us in this place are at least somewhat familiar with the Wittenoom story, the worst industrial calamity in this country. It is estimated that some 4 000 people who worked at that mine or lived in the town have since died from asbestos-related disease. Due to the toxic legacy of the once-booming asbestos industry, WA has witnessed tragically high numbers of diseases such as asbestosis, pleural disease, lung cancer and the newly coined malignant mesothelioma, which can be diagnosed only by specifically trained pathologists.

The suffering caused by asbestos mining and asbestos use is indeed a very sad chapter in the state's history. It was particularly appalling how asbestos companies initially refused to accept the moral and legal responsibility for this suffering and how former workers and others exposed to asbestos had to fight for years to have their cases for compensation recognised. This has affected entire families and caused much preventable misery over the last few decades. Sadly, this fight is far from over. It is indeed a cruel irony that for a state with the highest rates of people dying from asbestos-related diseases, WA has some of the weakest laws protecting its victims. Previous governments have failed WA's asbestos victims. I urge the current state government to bring WA into line with the rest of Australia by allowing Western Australians to claim further compensation for asbestos-related diseases.

There is also a need for a funding injection into medical research around asbestos-related diseases. As the ADSA president, Robert Vojakovic, has noted, it is pretty tough that victims and the public are effectively funding their own medical research through the Asbestos Diseases Society of Australia's fundraising activities. Surely the companies and government should be leading this, not the victims who are already fighting for their lives. I urge the state government not to forget about those who are still suffering.