



Mrs Pauline Gordon, flanked by Mr Neil Walker and Mr Harry Freeburn, holds up asbestos litter in Baryulgil — Picture: SIMON BULLARD

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Asbestos horror for Aboriginal miners

By JENI COOPER and BERWYN LEWIS

AUSTRALIA has the highest rate of the rare disease mesothelioma — a cancer of the linings of the heart, lungs and stomach — per head of population in the world. Two hundred cases are reported each year.

The head of Worksafe, the national mesothelioma surveillance program, Professor David Ferguson, said the disease could be prevented with scrupulous application of the asbestos code of practice released in 1988.

Two tiny Aboriginal townships, Baryulgil Square and Mulabugilmah on the north coast of NSW, are only a short distance from an asbestos mine, which has now been filled in.

But the Aborigines are constantly reminded of the horror that has already claimed some lives — strands of asbestos still cover the ground and it is entwined in small rocks.

Mrs Pauline Gordon and her husband Linky have lived in Baryulgil with their three children since 1960.

Mrs Gordon said the Aborigines were not warned about the dangers of asbestos, which they suddenly learnt of in 1969 when Cyril Mundine contracted the disease after spending 22 years working in the mine and died.

In 1924 substantial deposits of asbestos were discovered at Baryulgil.

In 1927 the Aboriginal community which lived on the river flats about 8km downstream was trucked up to a paddock about 500m from the discovery and told to make their homes there.

By 1934 exploration leases to Wunderlich Ltd had been granted and in 1940 the mine began operation.

"In those days we didn't even have any water to wash with," Mrs Gordon told *The Australian*.

"We built homes around the mine and started a life. But now most of our people are very sick, with many women having asthma.

"The blokes are in very poor health.

"It's heartbreaking, but we can't do anything about it. There are laws for the rich and laws for the poor, and different laws for Aborigines, who are way down the bloody list."

Question

Mrs Gordon said the families who worked in the mine wanted some compensation.

But Mr Jim Kelso, the group community relations spokesman for the James Hardie company which owned the mine, believes it is a question of Aborigines who now find themselves out of work seeking compensation.

In 1944 a company was incorporated with two shareholders,

Wunderlich Ltd and James Hardie and Co Pty Ltd.

These two companies operated a company called Asbestos Mines Pty Ltd until 1954 when James Hardie bought out Wunderlich. In 1975 the mine was sold to Woodsreef Mines in 1975. The mine closed in 1979.

Since that time a number of cases of asbestos related disease have been diagnosed among the former workers. A white man who worked in the mills has since died of mesothelioma.

In 1983-84 the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs conducted a report.

Recommendations were made that the Baryulgil Square be cleared of its inhabitants and that the former workers who suffered injury start proceedings against the companies that employed them.

A statement by the then minister for Aboriginal affairs, Mr Clyde Holding, said: "There was also prima facie evidence to suggest that health regulations governing the mining of asbestos in NSW had not been met.

"The committee concluded that the manner in which the mine and mill had operated was capable of producing asbestos related disease."

The report noted there was evidence of forewarning of inspec-

tions by the NSW Department of Mines and Department of Health to James Hardie at a senior level.

Further tests, taken after the committee had finished its report by a researcher from Deakin University, NSW, found the level of asbestos in the atmosphere of Baryulgil was very small.

In the face of that information the community decided to remain where they were.

The Department of Aboriginal Affairs has agreed to underake guttering and roadworks and drainage to prevent a further increase in airborne asbestos.

Proceedings have since been started by workers of the mine, naming the operating company Marlew Mining Pty Ltd, formerly Asbestos Mines Pty Ltd, and the James Hardie group of companies and the NSW Government as defenders in both the Supreme and District Courts of NSW.

The claimants are seeking compensation for asbestos-related injury and disease.

These cases are at various stages before the courts.

Mrs Gordon said: "We need to upgrade our style of living; no black will move from the tribal area as this has been our home for the past 40,000 years."

Mrs Gordon said her two boys, now 25 and 22, grew up in the area and used to play in the "shivers" — asbestos tailings.