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~Linda

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# Missoula conference hears tales of asbestos-related disease in Libby

**By JAMIE KELLY of the Missoulian | Posted: Saturday, February 5, 2011 10:24 pm**

It was hard to see a "slow-moving disaster" in progress as the town of Libby was poisoned by asbestos-laced vermiculite, and even harder to know when and how the story will conclude.

So said speakers at a presentation Saturday afternoon at St. Patrick Hospital, which began hosting a five-day conference Friday on "Reclaiming Human Health by Restoring the Planet."

A doctor who's treated the victims for 30 years, a social worker in the northwestern Montana timber town and a lifelong Libby resident who has lost 13 family members to asbestos-related disease all told a crowded conference room of the hell of the town's sufferings and the hope that it will one day end.

Gayla Benefield first realized the horror of what was happening when her father, a worker at W.R. Grace's zonolite mine, discovered in 1972 that "he had no lungs." He quickly died.

Since then, her mother has died of the mine's poisons, as well as 11 others in her extended family of 50. In all, 33 of them have been sickened, including one of her children.

It was Benefield who kept blowing the whistle in Libby, trying to get the attention of federal and state regulators, the media, the townspeople themselves.

But everywhere she turned, she was met with denial, anger and silence.

"Who was going to worry about a few miners and their families?" she asked the audience, many of whom were just learning the story of Libby. "That was all we heard. 'You are ruining our town. We're trying to build an economy based on tourism, and nobody will want to come to Libby.' "

Too many people have left Libby unwillingly. More than 200 of them, in fact, dead from the mine's vermiculite, the feisty, rogue fiber that blanketed the town and got sucked up into the lungs of its people.

It wasn't until November 1999 that a series of Seattle Post-Intelligencer stories shocked readers with the story of a company poisoning its employees and their families, politicians who didn't believe it and doctors who couldn't really see it.

One of those doctors is Brad Black, now the medical director of the Center for Asbestos Related Disease in Libby.

Most Libby doctors merely believed sufferers had asthma because Libby "had similar problems of Missoula in terms of particulate and inversions," he said.

And those patchy white areas showing up on X-rays? They were thought to be "beauty marks" of previous asbestos exposure. But certainly not from anything in Libby.

All the deaths hit hard to a doctor who treats patients suffering from asbestosis and other diseases borne of their exposure to the poisons. But last year's death of a 56-year-old man, a close friend of Black's who played in piles of dredged asbestos as a kid, was especially painful.

Because more of them are coming. Probably for decades.

"He was simply a youngster who played in it," said Black. "And we're going to see many more like that."

Social worker Tanis Hernandez, who also works at CARD, said as hard as the reality of the "slow-moving disaster" has been for the medical community to accept, it's been even harder for the people of Libby.

To this day, there are people who don't believe it, she said.

"Information itself is the disaster to many people," she said. "It can all become so baffling and overwhelming to them."

For many who realize what's happened in Libby, the reality has shaken their world, causing "worldview damage," distrust of companies and government, anger and the sense of a complete loss of control.

And occasionally a disbeliever will have all of those emotions come crashing down at once - after they're diagnosed.

"What a change for an individual to have to change their whole paradigm of thought," she said. "Because suddenly, they are facing the diagnosis. And facing the issue."

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