

The International Agency for Research on Cancer announced last month that, after reviewing the latest scientific literature, it had concluded exposure to outdoor air pollution caused lung cancer. It also noted a link with bladder cancer.

Significantly for Upper Hunter residents, particulate matter, which is a major component of outdoor air pollution, was evaluated separately and was also classified as carcinogenic to humans.

Singleton Healthy Environment Group spokesman John Drinan said policymakers needed to take the agency's latest advice about the effects of poor air quality seriously.

Dr Drinan said he doubted it was possible to effectively regulate air quality in the Hunter while large-scale open-cut mining took place.

"From what we know, any level of fine particulates is injurious to human health, therefore you can't set a safe threshold," he said.

"It's a bit like the 0.5 limit for alcohol; you think if you're below 0.5 you're safe, but you're not. But at some point you need to strike a balance between what the community is prepared to tolerate in the way of loss in return for gain."

The Environment Protection Authority has introduced a number of measures to improve air quality in the region including the Dust Stop program for mines.

Another program aims to reduce diesel emissions from off-road vehicles and mining equipment and it is also working with councils to improve wood smoke management.

NSW Health investigated a suspected brain cancer cluster in the Singleton area in 2010 following long-held community concerns about the health impacts of coal dust.

The investigation, which focused on five cases over a 35-year period, was unable to find a direct link and concluded the cases were a statistical anomaly. It did, however, suggest the cases and their potential causes were worthy of further investigation.

Professor Wayne Smith from NSW Health's environmental health branch said the agency's statement was accepted knowledge in the field of air pollution research.

“The ... statement provides additional justification for the actions that the NSW government is taking to reduce the population’s exposure to air pollution, including the actions being taken in the Upper Hunter,” he said.

NSW Health data, released at September’s air quality forum in Newcastle, estimated fine particle pollution resulted in 25 deaths in the greater Newcastle area each year. Two deaths a year were attributed to exposure to fine particle pollution in Muswellbrook and Singleton. Fine particle pollution causes 223 deaths in Sydney each year.

A NSW Minerals Council spokesman said the industry was committed to improving air quality.

“Mining contributes to regional particulate matter, but we’re one of many contributors. Other sources include cars and other transport, sea spray, bushfires and wood smoke from homes,” he said.

The Dust and Diseases Tribunal yesterday found BHP had negligently exposed Mr Dunning to the asbestos, ordering it to pay him more than \$2.2 million in damages.

STEEL AND SICKNESS: Newcastle's BHP steelworks, where Steven Dunning worked and was afflicted with incurable mesothelioma.

# \$2.2m for BHP victim

By PAUL BIBBY and SAM RIGNEY

A CESSNOCK man who was exposed to asbestos while working at the Newcastle steelworks has won a \$2.2 million damages claim against BHP Billiton.

Steven Dunning, 54, is suffering from terminal mesothelioma as a consequence of the asbestos dust he inhaled while working on BHP's steel blast furnaces as a 19-year-old in the early 1980s.

The Dust and Diseases Tribunal yesterday found BHP had negligently exposed Mr Dunning to the asbestos, ordering it to pay him more than \$2.2 million in damages.

It's the highest amount awarded in the tribunal's history and marks the first time BHP has been ordered to pay compensation to a former employee of the Newcastle steelworks with incurable mesothelioma.

"He broke down when I rang him and told him," Mr



**CHANGED FOREVER:** Steven Dunning, left, and his wife Roma.



Dunning's wife, Roma, said yesterday.

"The main part of it for him was that his family was looked after - that's the thing he really cared about."

One of the lawyers who brought the action, Joanna Wade, said the verdict was a significant victory for Mr Dunning and his family but "it does not take away from the fact that he is dealing with an incurable, terminal disease as a result of BHP's negligence".

"BHP has fought this case for almost four years, arguing every available legal point," Ms Wade said.

During the course of the six-

wearing of masks.

"A worker cannot be expected to make an informed decision about whether or not to wear a mask unless he is fully informed as to the risks of not wearing a mask," the judgment states.

"As a result of the failure to warn and educate and take steps to enforce the wearing of masks, the plaintiff was exposed to and inhaled asbestos dust.

"He was also deprived of the opportunity of choosing not to work in that environment. He did not like the dirty work environment. I accept that if he knew it was potentially fatal, he would probably have chosen not to work in it."

Mrs Dunning said she was disgusted by the fervour and determination with which BHP pursued the matter through the courts, rather than "standing up and accepting responsibility for their actions".

"Do you think any of those executives calling the shots are getting sick? Absolutely

not. I just really want to urge anyone else who's sick from asbestos to come forward," she said. "Hopefully now BHP will be more accountable."

Mrs Dunning said their lives had changed dramatically since her husband was diagnosed with the disease. "I cannot begin to explain the devastation we felt on the day we were told he had this terminal illness," Mrs Dunning said.

"We are trying to make the most of every day even though Steven is still very sick and unable to do most of the things he used to enjoy.

"It is a daily struggle knowing that I will not have my loving husband to grow old with and that he will never meet his grandchildren and his life will be cut so short. "We never expected this to happen."

BHP said it had not ruled out appealing the verdict.



**Lewis's view,**  
Cartoon, Page 10

The dust, tens of thousands of tonnes of which is released each year by the coal industry, contains varying levels of nitrous oxide, heavy metals including lead and uranium, plus arsenic, cadmium and other toxic chemicals.

## green left Weekly

### Hunter coal dust health concerns

Sunday, April 18, 2010 - 10:00

By [Zane Alcorn Newcastle \(taxonomy/term/2219\)](#)

An Upper Hunter community campaign for a full comprehensive health study on the effects of air pollution from coalmines and coal-fired power stations is coming to a head.

ABC TV's *Four Corners* brought the issue to national prominence with its April 12 screening of "A Dirty Business". It followed a series of articles published recently in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and local media outlets, the *Newcastle Herald* and the *Singleton Argus*.

The reports have focused on the large amount of dust emitted from mines and from two coal-fired power stations (Liddell and Bayswater) in the Singleton and Muswellbrook area. They document a corresponding trend towards higher rates of asthma, bronchial disease and other complaints.

The dust, tens of thousands of tonnes of which is released each year by the coal industry, contains varying levels of nitrous oxide, heavy metals including lead and uranium, plus arsenic, cadmium and other toxic chemicals. Its effect is compounded by many residents' reliance on tank water.

An April 12 *SMH* article said: "Five residents around a single block in Singleton have been struck with brain tumours, prompting fears that a cancer cluster has erupted in the heavily polluted mining town."

The current media exposure is a welcome change for those campaigning for the state government to conduct a health study into the region.

Calls for the study have mostly been ignored by the state government. Hunter MP Jodi McKay told Singleton campaigners the area didn't warrant a health study due to its "relatively small population", the *SMH* said.

The greater Singleton/Muswellbrook area is home to more than 40,000 people.

The cost of a study into the effects of coalmining and power generation on health in the region is tiny compared to the royalties the NSW government earns from mining and electricity generation, not to mention coal export earnings by mine owners.

Muswellbrook coalminer Peter Kennedy, who featured on the *Four Corners* program, told *Green Left Weekly*: "As a result of the program going to air, it would seem that [NSW] Premier Kristina Keneally has been shamed into ordering a study of cancer clusters in the Singleton township."

#### Comprehensive study needed

An April 14 rally at McKay's office in Newcastle demanded the study not be confined to looking at the suspected cancer cluster. NSW Greens MLC Lee Rhiannon told the rally that Keneally needed to "show some humanity [and] look at the cumulative impact of coalmining on the Upper Hunter in terms of health and the environment".

Media outlets reported that Keneally had not ruled out such a comprehensive study, but her government is trying to dodge the issue. If it happened, the study would confirm what is already widely known: the mines and power stations are toxic and make people sick.

This finding would have two effects. First, community campaigns would most likely demand more rigorous regulation of existing mines, power stations and coal processing and transport facilities. Second — more concerning from the perspective of mining companies and their stooges in government — is the viability of the industry itself would be called into question even more.

Calls for "no new coal" would grow stronger, as would calls to phase the industry out altogether.

#### Campaign to cut emissions

While campaigners in the Singleton and Muswellbrook areas have been ignored by government bureaucrats, grassroots climate campaigners from across NSW and around Australia have been familiarising themselves with the issue.

There exists the very real potential for a powerful alliance between local community health campaigners, trade unionists and the large and growing network of climate activists across the country.

The best way to cut dust also happens to be the best way to cut carbon dioxide emissions: leave the coal in the ground and create renewable energy (and jobs) instead.

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