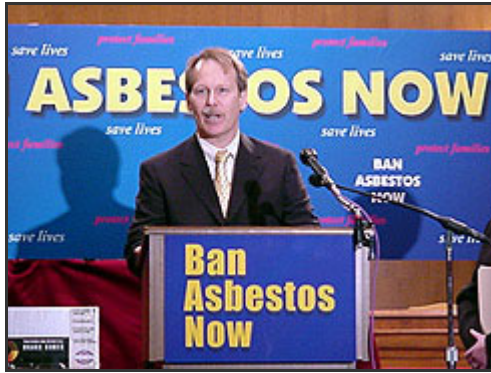


Ban Asbestos Now Press Conference

Statement by Dr. Bret Williams

My name is Bret Williams. I am a physician from North Carolina. I have a wife and three children. I am here today to speak against asbestos, to call for banning this substance from our lives and for research into better treatments for those harmed by it. My interest begins with personal experience.



Dr. Bret Williams

Although I am a doctor, I am not a wealthy man. I have devoted my life to caring for medically underserved populations. I have worked in government clinics for the poor, helped author important public health research, directed a privately-funded free clinic, and volunteered to provide much needed care in the developing world. My illness has not just been an emotional roller coaster for my family, but a financial disaster for them as well.

A year and a half ago I began having pains on the right side of my chest. These came and went over the next several months. I was concerned, but neither I nor my colleagues were suspicious of serious disease. A nonsmoker, I jogged 25 miles per week and was in excellent health. But almost six months after my symptoms began, I discovered that I had malignant mesothelioma, an aggressive cancer that begins in the lining of the chest or abdomen. The only known cause of mesothelioma is asbestos.

As a doctor, I knew how to find the best possible care. Unfortunately, there is not much to offer mesothelioma patients. My best shot at cure was extrapleural pneumonectomy, a procedure best described as radical amputation of a lung, removing the chest lining and part of the diaphragm as well. I traveled to New York City, where one of the best surgeons in the country performed my operation. The next day I required another surgery, to remove blood clots from the right side of my chest. Two weeks later I returned home, weakened but still optimistic.

Things got worse. A few days later I hemorrhaged into the sac around my heart, causing a life-threatening condition called cardiac tamponade. After a helicopter ride to Duke and emergency surgery, I spent weeks in intensive care. I could not be weaned off the respirator, and doctors braced my wife and three children for the worst. I have no memory of this, but I'm told that I somehow escaped my restraints, extubated myself, and began to breathe without assistance. I left the hospital a week later, in a wheelchair, almost fifty pounds lighter than before.

After that I made it through six weeks of extensive radiation, during which I felt as bad as I looked. I was hospitalized twice more for nausea, dehydration, and irregular heart rhythm. But even though it nearly killed me, I know that most patients with mesothelioma are not candidates for the treatment I received. I'm one of the lucky ones.

But I also know that I may not have much time. This cancer usually comes back. I live with a time bomb in my chest, waiting to explode. What I and others like me most need is hope for the future, hope that can only come from effective treatment. The Mesothelioma Applied Research Foundation is doing great things, but its resources are not adequate to the task. Research for a cure should be a priority. Sadly, the asbestos bill before Congress would save industry many millions of dollars, but would not divert any of that windfall to research or prevention.

Instead of solving a public health crisis, the thrust of pending legislation is simply to shield from liability the very corporations that poisoned me and legions of others. We've known for a century that this substance is toxic. It's a shame at this late date that we have to debate whether or not we should continue allowing thousands of people to die each year. It's a shame that we continue to spend millions on fixing blame in the courts while spending pennies on fixing the problem.

I have never worked in a shipyard or refinery. I inhaled asbestos fibers doing things many of us have done: I grew up in an old house, worked summer jobs, attended schools under construction, and renovated homes. My exposure demonstrates how commonplace this toxic substance is in our lives.

And take note: any exposure places you at risk for mesothelioma. Asbestos fibers do not respect the color of your collar. They don't respect your education, your wealth, your rank, power, influence, or age. They will infiltrate the lungs of an insulator, schoolteacher, a doctor, politician, and a famous navy admiral with indiscriminate malice.

As a doctor, a cancer patient, a husband and father, I am asking my government to take a stand. Fix the problem. Give us hope. Fund a mesothelioma research program. Please invest in a cure.

Thank you.