



Asbestos Victims Association of South Australia

Media Release

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Record asbestos compensation welcomed: advocates urge warnings for home renovators

Asbestos advocates have welcomed a record \$3,077,187 compensation payment for an Adelaide man who developed an aggressive and incurable cancer as a result of his exposure to James Hardie building products during home renovations.

The Asbestos Victims Association of South Australia said the South Australian Employment Tribunal decision was significant not only for the record size of the compensation, but because of its strong message about the need for improved public awareness of the risks of asbestos products still found in many homes and workplaces.

Mathew Werfel, a 42-year-old father of three from Adelaide's northern suburbs, was diagnosed with a rare form of the aggressive and terminal cancer mesothelioma as a result of exposure to asbestos during home renovations and when working for a fencing contractor as a teenager.

Judge Leonie Farrell imposed significant exemplary damages as punishment for James Hardie's failure to properly warn the public about the risk posed by its asbestos products, saying it did so "purely for commercial gain".

She also highlighted that the lack of community education and awareness was an ongoing issue, with James Hardie failing to adequately warn the general public about the ongoing dangers posed by their deadly products which remain in thousands of homes.

AVA spokeswoman Lesley Shears said Mr Werfel's case was tragic, but he was unfortunately just one of thousands of Australians diagnosed with an asbestos related disease each year.

"Mathew Werfel's case is tragic, not only because a man at the prime of his life with three young children is now facing a terminal cancer, but because it highlights how easily people can unknowingly be exposed to asbestos around the house or at work," Ms Shears said.

"Millions of young Australians have done exactly what Mr Werfel did, buying a basic home that they've then renovated themselves.

"What many don't realise is that there are still huge numbers of properties containing asbestos products, which often have no labels or warnings on them.

"Simple actions like sanding walls or drilling holes releases the asbestos fibres, which can then be inhaled and result in deadly diseases from even the smallest of exposures.

"James Hardie should read this judgment very closely and finally do what they should have done decades ago by carrying out a serious, large-scale public education campaign that tells the public what the risks are, how to identify them, and what can be done to have the asbestos safely removed.

“It is not good enough to pay compensation to people after they are diagnosed with an incurable disease; James Hardie should be doing everything possible to prevent people from being exposed in the first place.

“Without serious action, Mr Werfel will be just one of many more people in the growing third wave of asbestos victims who are exposed to asbestos in their homes and workplaces.”

Media contact: Lesley Shears — 0455 120 588