

Asbestos expert shaves for awareness

CANCER SOCIETY

Mesothelioma is a tricky word to pronounce but an important one to know.

It's the name of the cancer caused mainly by exposure to asbestos.

It takes only a few asbestos fibres to cause mesothelioma, a cancer for which there is no cure. Asbestos was widely used in buildings in the 60s, 70s and 80s and can still be found in many homes.

While it's safe when undisturbed, New Zealanders' love of DIY has expert Dr Terri-Ann Berry worried that keen renovators might be putting themselves at risk.

Berry is so passionate about the issue of the dangers of asbestos, she has even shaved off her waist-length blonde hair to raise awareness.

"A lot of people think asbestos was a problem for their grandparents' generation and don't know how to spot it," says Berry, who is director of Environmental Solutions Research Centre at Unitec.

"Asbestos can be lurking in ceilings, roofing, and textured paint. People need to be cautious and call in the experts if they're not sure what they're doing."

About 170 New Zealanders are diagnosed with mesothelioma every year. Not all of them are tradespeople – sometimes the fibres can be



Before, after and during Dr Terri-Ann Berry having her waist-length blonde hair shaved off to raise awareness of dangers of asbestos. Mesothelioma is a cancer caused mainly by exposure to asbestos, and there is no cure.

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Dr Terri-Ann Berry

carried home on clothing.

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Asbestos is also difficult to dispose of.

Most is buried in landfill,

which can cause problems years later if it's disturbed. Finding a solution to this has formed the basis of Berry's work at Unitec, where Berry and her team are researching ways to use bacteria and fungi to break asbestos own

into a non-hazardous form.

Berry's students were there to cheer her on when she shaved her head for the Cancer Society in August, which was a particularly big sacrifice for the 48-year-old.

"When I was a teenager, I developed a hip condition that meant years of painful operations and difficulty walking.

"I gained a lot of weight and was withdrawn but I was constantly told how beautiful my long blonde hair was. It became my trademark and my best asset.

"The night before the big shave I was nervous – my youngest child asked me if he could have a kiss 'with my hair still on' before bed, and this made it worse!

"The next morning in the shower I even said sorry and goodbye to my hair. But, by then, I was determined.

"I had decided to donate my hair to make a wig for cancer sufferers, and that gave me a boost."

Berry has surprised herself with how much she loves her new look.

"It's cool and funky and I feel younger and more confident than ever. I have found my look – and I like it!

"What a wonderful way to raise money and awareness."

If you're interested in shaving your head for cancer, visit auckland-northland.cancernz.org.nz to find out more.

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