

THE 7:30 REPORT

9-11 attacks continue to haunt US health

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Almost six years after the terrorist attacks on America, the medical fall-out continues. Thousands of rescue workers, volunteers and residents have experienced a range of illnesses thought to be related to the toxic mix of air at the site of ground zero. Meanwhile a series of congressional hearings are investigating the way New York authorities handled the clean-up.

Transcript

ALI MOORE: Well after almost six years after the terrorist attacks on America, the medical fall-out continues.

Thousands of rescue workers, volunteers and residents have experienced a range of illnesses thought to be related to the toxic mix of air at the site of Ground Zero.

A number of deaths have been linked to the exposure, and now scientific research is pointing to another wave of disease.

New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg estimates the annual cost of treating people affected by World Trade Centre dust is \$393 million US dollars a year - that's around \$464 million Australian.

Meanwhile, a series of Congressional hearings are investigating the way New York authorities handled the clean-up.

This report from the ABC's North America correspondent.

JOHN WALCOTT, FORMER NYPD DETECTIVE: You would walk down one street and the smoke and the black soot would be up to my waist. I'm six foot two inches tall. Next street there'd be cars on fire, buildings on fire. Next street there'd be nothing.

TRACEY BOWDEN: On September 11, 2001, as thousands of people battled to get out of New York City, detective John Walcott rushed into the maelstrom - the chaos of what would become known as Ground Zero.

JOHN WALCOTT: They did anything from the bucket brigade of digging, security of the site, searching the buildings to see if there were any people trapped or deceased inside or surrounding buildings.

TRACEY BOWDEN: John Walcott spent the next six months in the area. In the first weeks in this filthy, choking environment, he and many others worked without respirators.

JOHN WALCOTT: You would get home and take a shower and your pillow case, when you slept and your shower - it looked like you stood in a barbecue pit. You would scrub your teeth, two or three, four, five times and you would keep spitting out black.

TRACEY BOWDEN: Did you think much of your safety or the conditions?

JOHN WALCOTT: You can't go back, I mean, you know, it was my job. I always knew there was risk, you know, taking

a job in one of the most dangerous cities in the world. I never thought it would be blood cancer. I thought maybe it would be a shoot-out, or whatever, fire or - never thought it would be, you know, the people I work for pretty much throwing me into a gas chamber.

DAVID WORBY, CLASS ACTION LAWYER: We have 400,000 pounds of asbestos, 91,000 litres of burning jet fuel, 125,000 gallons of burnt PCBs from carbon transform oils to 200,000 pounds of lead, 500,000 units of mercury light bulb, 2,000 tonnes of particulate matter.

TRACEY BOWDEN: Lawyer David Worby represents 10,000 people suing New York City and several contractors for negligence.

DAVID WORBY: So at some point early on, this became a waste site, a toxic waste site where they had to move the toxic waste from point A to point B, and they decided to do that 24/7 and risk 70,000 lives. It just doesn't get worse than that.

TRACEY BOWDEN: Today, as workers return to the site to begin construction of four new towers, cases of illness and disease continue to emerge. A study of 10,000 recovery workers reveals that 60 per cent still have respiratory problems, and doctors are warning the medical impact of the tragedy is far from over.

Almost six years after the attacks, doctors here in New York believe they could be seeing the third wave of sickness related to conditions at Ground Zero. First there was the dry persistent cough - it became known as the World Trade Centre cough. Then a range of respiratory conditions. Now, possibly cancer.

JOHN WALCOTT: I got diagnosed with AML leukaemia, which is a form of toxin cancer, blood cancer. You know, everybody's assumption is it was direct correlation to my exposure for months and months down at Ground Zero.

TRACEY BOWDEN: John Woolcott was the first, but the World Trade Centre medical monitoring program is now studying several unusual cancer cases.

DAVID WORBY: The solid tumour cases we've seen less of and take longer to develop. And then what's known as blood cell cancers, which is cancer in the blood, in the bone marrow, that's myeloma. Multiple myeloma. Non-Hodgkinson's lymphoma. Leukaemia, mostly AML. Those blood cell cancers - we have over 130 people, including John Walcott.

TRACEY BOWDEN: How hard will it be to prove that these diseases are a direct result of conditions at Ground Zero?

DAVID WORBY: When this many people get sick, when 20,000 people are sick of the 70,000 who were there and the others are now worried about it, and the only thing all these people shared in common, there's just no other explanation.

TRACEY BOWDEN: The latest medical findings coincide with congressional hearings into what the public was told about air quality around Ground Zero.

SENATOR HILLARY CLINTON: I simply cannot accept what appears to have been a deliberate effort to provide unwarranted reassurances at the direction of the White House to New Yorkers about whether their air was safe to breathe.

TRACEY BOWDEN: At the centre of the criticism, then Environmental Protection Agency administrator Christine Todd Whitman, who said this just days after the attacks.

CHRISTINE TODD WHITMAN: But from a real health problem and health concerns, we don't have to worry.

DAVID NEWMAN, INDUSTRIAL HYGIENIST: Workers were subjected to conditions and to hazards in a manner that in

any other circumstance would have been completely illegal.

TRACEY BOWDEN: Industrial hygienist Dave Newman says it seemed the speed of the clean up took priority over safety.

DAVID NEWMAN: There needed to be coordination, there needed to be a health and safety plan, there needed to be the beginnings of organisation to restrict access to the site, to properly train and equip workers.

TRACEY BOWDEN: John, were you ever ordered to wear respirators, or told you should?

JOHN WALCOTT: No, it took approximately, I would say, three weeks before I got a respirator, and approximately two, three weeks later we were at roll-call down at the site and they said, "Look," - I think it was the American Express building - "you guys have to go back and change the filters because the filters we gave you were the wrong filters."

TRACEY BOWDEN: It wasn't just those working at Ground Zero who got sick. Volunteers, office workers and residents were also affected.

Manhattan's Bellevue Hospital has set up a special World Trade Centre clinic. The number of patients just keeps growing, many of them with no medical insurance.

MICHAEL MOORE, DOCUMENTARY MAKER: Heroes of 9/11 deserve to be at the front of the line of the people who should be getting help.

TRACEY BOWDEN: Documentary maker Michael Moore has also bought into the topic in his latest film on the American health system.

(Excerpt from *Sicko*)

MICHAEL MORE: Which way to Guantánamo Bay.

POLITICIAN: Detainees representing a threat to our national security are given access to top notch medical facilities.

MICHAEL MOORE: Permission to enter. I have three 9/11 rescue workers. They just want some medical attention, the same kind that the evil-doers are getting.

(End of excerpt)

TRACEY BOWDEN: Residents and workers made the journey from New York to Washington for the congressional hearings, demanding answers.

MIRIAM JAMES, NY RESIDENT: My kids got sick a month after the 9/11 and it's awful. So I came to see what it is they're going to tell us now, what is their excuse today after so many years, so many people getting sick now.

CHRISTINE TODD WHITMAN, FORMER EPA ADMINISTRATOR: I am disappointed at the misinformation, innuendo and outright falsehoods

Former EPA head Christine Todd Whitman was on the defensive over claims she misled the public.

CHRISTINE TODD WHITMAN: Congressman, you know, it's fine to go through the yes and no's but I think it's important for people to understand these were not whims, these were not decisions by a politician. Everything I said was based on what I was hearing from professionals. My son was in building seven on that day, Congressman, and I almost lost him. This is as personal to me as it is to anyone and I would never lie to the public, ever.

TRACEY BOWDEN: All the debate in the world won't change the fact that thousands of people are sick and need help. The medical bills will continue to mount, but the Government has no clear formula as to who will pay. Countless people are worried they won't be looked after.

DAVID WORBY: They have to resolve this, they have to settle these cases, fairly compensate all these human beings who are sick and take care of them for the rest of their lives. They're sick.

TRACEY BOWDEN: Almost six years on a final resolution to the fall out from 9/11 seems like wishful thinking.

ALI MOORE: Tracey Bowden with that report.

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