

FILE NAME: Colonial Sugar Refinery (CSR)

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DOCUMENT DESCRIPTION: Physician Letter with Very Serious Concerns about RE Conditions at Wittenoom & Case Note of Worker Who Died of Mesothelioma After Only Two Years Exposure

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25th July 1961

Dr. H. Maynard Rennie, F.R.C.P., F.R.A.C.P.,
183 Macquarie Street,
SYDNEY NSW.

My dear Ted,

The plot thickens a little concerning the asbestos mine at Wittenoom. By arrangement Dr. McNulty, the Mines Medical Officer, whom I had never had the pleasure of meeting previously, and Dr. Don Letham, the industrial disease expert in the Public Health Department here, whom I know well and regard very highly, came to see me yesterday and we traversed the whole field. Before I go any further, I must ask you to be very careful about the way in which you utilise the story which I am about to tell you because Dr. McNulty and Dr. Letham both make it very clear that the optimistic statement which Mr. Allan made to me regarding the incidence of "dusting" at Wittenoom, which I quoted to you in my letter, does not convey an accurate picture. Letham and McNulty both regard the working conditions at Wittenoom as very poor and state indeed that they constitute a public menace. They showed me a number of films taken during the routine survey of mine workers and had the clinical history of these men with them; apparently it is quite possible to be so badly dusted as to be totally and permanently incapacitated within four or five years. Both doctors are of opinion that the Company has not got a well-developed conscience on the matter and feel very strongly that very urgent action is required. It would obviously be much better from every point of view if the initiation of better ventilating measures came from within the Company than as the result of external pressure by Mines and Health Departments. As you know, in Western Australia at the present time we are endeavouring to boost our production in every possible way and a public outcry is not going to help to attract Western Australian mining capital to the State. It would also, I am sure, bring about very considerable difficulties for the Company in securing and maintaining an adequate labour force. On the other hand from what McNulty and Letham tell me action must definitely be taken. My suggestion would be that, if you can spare the time, the C.S.R. authorities should send you and a consultant ventilation engineer on a tour of inspection. We would make arrangements here so that on the day following your arrival McNulty and Letham, with their films and their case records, could be at your disposal for the day. You could fly to Wittenoom on the following morning, spend two or three days there, fly back to Perth and have another day with the two doctors, and be back in Sydney inside a working week.

I do ask you to regard this request very seriously because both McNulty and Letham are competent men of good faith and the records and films which they showed me yesterday, and the figures which they quoted are quite horrifying.

With best regards,

25th July 1961

Dr. H. Maynard Rennie

P.S. Perhaps the worst case which was demonstrated to me yesterday was of a man who worked for two years only in the mill at Wittenoom some years ago, had not been in a dusty atmosphere since and who died the other day of a malignant pleural mesothelioma and pulmonary asbestosis and silicosis.

I enclose copies of some relevant reports and would, if possible, like to have these back in due course.