

BEHIND THE HEADLINES

The timebomb of Scotland's industrial past

SPECIAL REPORT

Deborah Punshon finds out how a group in Glasgow is making a huge difference to people with asbestos-related conditions

Behind the facade of a very unassuming building in Glasgow, important work is going on. You would walk past Clydeside Action on Asbestos's offices on High Street, barely giving it a second glance.

But what's going on behind those doors is as impressive as it is surprising.

For over 25 years, the CAA charity has been a voice and a backbone for people with asbestos-related illnesses.

It has lobbied, campaigned and worked hand-in-hand with medical and legal experts to right a lethal legacy of Scotland's industrial past.

It has fought for compensation for scores of people who have become ill because employers failed in their duties to protect them.

And it has successfully implemented changes in Scottish law which gives victims of asbestos-related conditions and their families more rights than elsewhere.

Despite all this work, there is a great deal still to do.

Last year alone, the CAA had 750 new clients, adding to the extensive list of those already receiving support.

It confirms that, despite public perception, the problem of asbestos-related illnesses is not fading.

Phyllis Craig MBE,



Public face...of the campaign, a memorial day held in Glasgow earlier this year which was organised by CAA.

director of CAA, said: "It's not going away, it's on the increase.

"White asbestos was only banned in 1999 and the latency period between being exposed to asbestos and being diagnosed with an asbestos condition is between 15 and 50 years.

"So people will continue to be diagnosed; the numbers are ever increasing.

"And we will be here to take on whatever comes our way; the campaigns will continue."

Formed in Glasgow in 1984 by a group of men, some of them installation engineers, the CAA initially

provided support to affected people looking to pursue compensation claims.

It now runs nine support groups and focuses on maximising the income of its clients, most of whom are too ill to work.

Some have contracted mesothelioma, an aggressive cancer of the lining of the lung associated with asbestos exposure.

The rights of the people with this largely incurable condition and their families have considerably improved thanks to the charity.

A CAA campaign eventually resulted in the Rights of Relatives to Damages (Mesothelioma) (Scotland) Act 2007, easing the financial strain for victims.

Phyllis said: "Originally if someone was terminally ill and took their damages in life, their spouse or family got nothing.

"These people were going to die and were being put in a position where they had to make an agonising choice – do they take the money now so they can live their life and

enjoy it or leave it for their family after they die.

"We thought that was morally wrong, we fought against that and the Scottish Government supported it.

"We got a change in the law so now the person can take their damages in life but a widow can come back and claim damages for their loss and their dependents."

It was a substantial legal victory and one which helped the charity earn the Public Campaign of the Year title at The Politician of the Year Awards in 2008.

Phyllis said: "We want to make a difference and we are not going to accept it's alright to allow people to be exploited and thrown on the rubbish heap.

"I don't think it's right or fair for people to find it difficult to get damages."

Another example of how quickly the CAA could react and mobilise support came after a ruling by the House of Lords which removed the right of those who suffer from pleural plaques to pursue civil compensation.

Pleural plaques are



Ever growing...Clydeside Action on Asbestos director Phyllis Craig said the number of people affected by asbestos-related conditions is on the increase.

scratches on the lungs which appear 20 to 30 years after exposure to asbestos.

Because they are benign and do not directly lead to serious conditions like asbestosis or mesothelioma, insurers argued that they were, in fact, not an injury.

Phyllis said: "The common thread is that exposure can cause one or all asbestos-related conditions. "People who have pleural plaques worked in an industry where there was a lot of asbestos and they saw a lot of men contracting terminal illness.

"We believed that mental anguish, as well as the marks on the lungs, should be compensated for."

After campaigning to restore the right to pursue a civil claim and gathering cross-party MSP support, together with the backing of healthcare professionals and Thompsons Solicitors, the Damages (Asbestos Related Condition) (Scotland) Act 2009 was passed.

Those who work for the CAA are in no doubt that

more campaigns will be needed in the future.

At the beginning of the year, the group backed a bill launched by West of Scotland MSP Stuart McMillan to recover the medical costs of treating asbestos patients back to the NHS in Scotland.

It also continues to work with solicitors, advocates, and politicians, and is regularly invited to speak to medics and GPs.

It is a very public face to the people it supports, through its groups, organising memorial days and visiting hospitals.

But the secret of its success appears to come straight from the heart. "Because we care," said Phyllis. "That's first and foremost.

"People underestimate the people who work here and the effort we put in. "They may walk past our office and think we are just another charity, but we do so much and get things done."

For more, visit www.clydesideactiononasbestos.org.uk.

Asbestos related conditions: facts

There are several conditions linked to exposure to asbestos. Pleural plaques are benign markers of contact with asbestos, usually developing 20 years or more following exposure. Pleural plaques do not develop into cancer or any other asbestos-related condition. However, a diagnosis of pleural plaques does confirm that a person has been exposed to asbestos and there is, therefore, a small risk of developing a separate asbestos-related condition in the future. Asbestosis is a chronic lung condition caused by prolonged exposure to asbestos.

It causes fibrosis or scarring of the lungs, usually developing 20 years or more after first exposure to asbestos dust. Symptoms can include shortness of breath, a cough, chest tightness and chest pain. Mesothelioma is cancer of the lining that covers most of the body's organs. It is usually caused by asbestos exposure, although it is not always possible to confirm exposure in the patient's history. It is five times more common in men than women, due to the patterns of occupational exposure to asbestos. An unpleasant disease, it has a poor prognosis.

Group and peer-to-peer support helps people enjoy life to the full

During the past 10 years, the CAA has set up nine support groups for people suffering from the effects of exposure to asbestos.

Running in the Borders, Forth Valley, Aberdeen, Inverness, North Lanarkshire, Greenock, Argyshire, Edinburgh and Glasgow, the groups offer everything from a chat with

another person going through the same thing to medical advice from consultants. Phyllis added: "The groups are fantastic.

"We have people who said they would reluctantly come at first who are now heavily involved.

"The support groups brings people together and reduces

their isolation. We have guest speakers, we bring the solicitors, we look at benefits and we get the physio in to do breathing classes.

"We very much promote the principles of self-management.

"We don't want people sitting back and thinking their life has ended; we want them to make

the most of their lives.

"When you're facing your own mortality, to get away and forget, and have a laugh, it makes all the difference.

"You can also talk to someone who can say to you: 'I've been there, I've walked in your shoes, I have gone through what you're going through and look at me now.'"



Thumbs up...from the team behind the Damages Scotland Bill 2011.