



New centre hits asbestos diseases for six



Director of the new centre, Professor Bruce Robinson and Federal Health Minister Tony Abbott both brought cricket into the launch

by Lindy Brophy

Even as mesothelioma victim Ellen Barnes told her story to a hushed room, using words like fatal and incurable, she said that the new National Research Centre for Asbestos Related Diseases had given her hope.

Ellen was a guest speaker at the UWA launch of the new Centre by the Federal Minister for Health and Ageing, Tony Abbott.

The \$6.2 million funding from the Federal Government, through the National Health and Medical Research Council, is supported by nearly a million dollars from UWA. The national centre will be based at the Western Australian Institute for Medical Research (WAIMR) and hosted by UWA.

Its new director is Professor Bruce Robinson, a world leader in research into asbestos-related cancers and a Professor in the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences. He is as aware of the horrors of mesothelioma as the gathered members of the Asbestos Diseases Society but chose to stay upbeat at the launch with a cricket comparison.

With the first Ashes test just days away, Professor Robinson produced a genuine baggy green cap, once worn by WA cricketer Craig Serjeant, as an analogy for the new research centre.

"The NHMRC has given us funding for 11 research projects over the next three years," Professor Robinson said. "These projects will be run by the best 11 researchers in the country – a bit like the Ashes being contested by the best 11 cricketers in the country.

"The difference is we're not trying to beat another team, we're trying to beat a disease."

Tony Abbott also brought up cricket, saying the Prime Minister was a 'medical research tragic' as well as a cricket tragic. "Like cricket, Australia is particularly good at medical research, but it is a game that is played more widely than cricket." He said the new research centre was important "because it helps people who are suffering here and now".

Ellen Barnes was one of those and her story made it clear that it was not just former mine workers from Wittenoom who were contracting the fatal disease.

"When I was diagnosed in May last year, I was the teacher in charge of English as a Second Language at Rossmoyne Senior High School. I had three grown-up children, I was happy, fit, healthy and had even started going to the gym."

A pain in her chest sent her to her GP, then the deadly mesothelioma was discovered.

"I remembered, as a teenager, helping my dad enclose a verandah with asbestos for a bedroom for me, and I sanded the walls before they were painted," she said.

Mrs Barnes has had various treatments with some success in prolonging her life. "I have had a taste of these effective treatments and I'm greedy for more. This new centre certainly brings hope to us all."

Professor Robinson said that mesothelioma was a very rare disease before the second world war. "Then we saw it in workers from Wittenoom. After widespread use of asbestos last century, it has now become a disease of the man in the street and I think WA has the highest incidence of it in the world."

The National Research Centre for Asbestos Related Diseases will support collaborations across Australia to help better understand mesothelioma and discover new treatments for the deadly cancer.