

A couple alone against cancer

In Dottignies, a village a few kilometres away from Mouscron on the Belgian-French border, a man has been fighting for several months to get his partner's cancer recognised as having been caused by her work. Working for a company in the textile sector, she was exposed to a carcinogenic solvent for fifteen years.

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Christophe Marescaux is convinced that his partner's cancer is a result of her old job.

Image: © Martine Zunini



More than a year after receiving the diagnosis, speaking about her illness remains difficult for the 40-year-old worker. "Multiple myeloma" ... up to her appointment with the doctor on 27 November 2016, Laurence Petit has never even heard of the two words. Neither had her partner, Christophe Maresceaux. Indeed, multiple myeloma is a relatively rare form of cancer, affecting the bone marrow¹.

They hadn't seen it coming. They found out quite by chance. Suffering from persistent fatigue, Ms Petit had been to see her GP. The blood test revealed anomalies: a "monoclonal peak", to use the exact medical jargon. The disease was detected at an early stage. With the cancer considered to be "dormant", the doctors did not prescribe any drastic medical treatment for the moment.

But what is it like living under the Damocles sword of a disease that attacks the bones? "In ten years' time, will I still be able to get around without assistance", Laurence wonders.

"How can my partner have developed a cancer at the young age of 48?", Christophe wonders in turn. The question plagues this robust, affable and voluble man, not one to be satisfied with ready-made answers.

"The doctors are all focused on curing diseases. But when you ask them about the causes, they quickly give you the feeling that they're not interested in this, that they don't want to be disturbed."

Getting no answers from the medical world on the possible occupational causes of the disease, he got out his computer and started searching the Internet for information, in all directions. He drilled down into the available documentation, visiting the websites of such international organisations as the IARC, the International Agency for Research on Cancer, an offshoot of the WHO. Building up his contacts, he knocked on many doors.

He soon discovered that multiple myeloma could be linked to exposure to solvents. He bombarded his wife with questions ... "Were you exposed to solvents when you worked at that textile company?" Laurence first said 'no', but later remembered always dipping her brush into a colourless liquid to clean it.

Throughout the day, some twenty women were subjected to the stink of glue, trichlo ... and cigarettes.

Trichlo and cigarette smoke

The couple live in Dottignies, a village a few kilometres away from Mouscron on the Belgian-French border. The industrial city of Roubaix is close by. For the last two centuries, this whole region has been dominated by the textile industry. But this prosperity seems to be over. While Mouscron still had some thirty textile companies providing work for 4,000 people in 1990, that number had dropped to 1,300 by 2012.

Christophe and Laurence received me in their large living room-kitchen, a sunlit and tastefully decorated room. While drinking coffee around the immense work surface in the middle of the kitchen, I asked Laurence to tell me how she found herself in contact with trichloroethylene at work.

Laurence Petit was just 19 when she started work at Antrafa, via a temp agency. The company was located close to the family home and she belonged to a family with no academic ambitions. "The oldest of five children, I had to go out to work to help support my parents", she explained.

Renamed Majaty in 2010, Antrafa is an SME producing catalogues for large flooring producers in the region. The young woman worked at the start of the chain, applying glue to the large cardboard sheets with the help of a brush, then placing them onto a conveyor belt for her colleagues to affix the carpet samples. To prevent glue building up on her brush, she regularly dipped it into an old tin full of liquid.

Laurence spent 15 years, eight hours a day, repeating these movements without ever

knowing what exactly was in that tin. "It was called trichlo, the name mentioned on the bottle from which the forewoman used to fill our pots, once a week", Laurence Petit vaguely remembered.

"She now blames herself, feeling almost guilty of having trusted her former employers", her partner said. "Trichlo" was trichloroethylene, a chlorinated compound derived from ethylene and long used as a solvent in many industries. Starting in the 1950s, it was used a lot for the manual removal of grease marks from textiles, for cleaning machines and other equipment which had come into contact with paint, glue, adhesives, rubber, plastics, etc.

Suspected of causing cancer in the 1970s, it was replaced by another chlorinated solvent, 1,1,1-trichloroethane. After the latter was banned in 1995, trichloroethylene reappeared on the market, though used a lot less². In that same year, the substance was classified by the WHO as being probably carcinogenic to humans³.

The news did not seem to have reached Mouscron, where Majaty was to continue to use the substance throughout the 1990s and 2000s. Apart from using it to clean brushes, the company also made small bottles of trichlo available to the women workers to clean off any dried glue from their hands before lunch, as there were no wash-basins on the shop floor. This ritual was repeated when they knocked off work at the end of the day. Once a year, trichloroethylene was also generously sprayed on the factory's conveyor belts to clean them.

Laurence Petit has no good memory of her former workplace: a building without

1. It accounted for less than 2% of all cancers in France in 2011 (source: Haute Autorité de Santé).

2. *Présentation de matrices emplois-expositions à cinq solvants chlorés.*

Quelques applications à un échantillon de population en France, Institut de veille sanitaire, mai 2009.

3. IARC Group 2A This classification was revised in October 2012, with trichloroethylene being reclassified as a proven carcinogen (Group 1) following various studies showing a link between it and cancer of the kidney.

4. See also the article in *HesaMag* No. 15: "Recognition of occupational cancers: Belgian families' fight for justice". Available at www.etui.org/Topics/Health-Safety-working-conditions/HesaMag

5. IARC Monographs on the Evaluation of Carcinogenic Risks to Humans. Volume 106 (2014) Trichloroethylene, Tetrachloroethylene, and Some Other Chlorinated Agents.

windows, with just artificial lighting, cold in winter, suffocating in summer. And above all very dirty. When the founder of the company handed over the business to his three children in the early 1990s, the cleaners were dismissed. The rooms were to be cleaned by the workers when they had time on their hands – in other words, almost never.

Throughout the day, some twenty women were subjected to the stink of glue, trichlo ... and cigarettes. "Keeping a permanent eye on us from his office, the boss smoked one cigarette after the other. It would therefore have been difficult for him to forbid his employees smoking. The smokers even smoked while working", remembered Laurence Petit.

In 1995, the young worker became pregnant. The label on the pot of glue in which she dipped her brush clearly stated: "Do not inhale". Up to now very discrete and not very vindictive, Laurence put her foot down this time, insisting that she be given another job, one less exposed to the small pots of "trichlo". Though transferred to another post, she remained working on the shop floor until shortly before her baby arrived.

Though her pregnancy went without problems, her baby's weight was abnormally low. The older daughter of Ms Petit was to be constantly monitored by the paediatricians from the Brussels university hospital Saint Luc until she was ten. At that time, she never considered any link with her work environment. But now, following the diagnosis of her cancer and after becoming aware of how she was exposed to hazardous products, Laurence wonders whether her daughter's growth problems might possibly be linked to the toxic air she inhaled during her first pregnancy.

They look daggers at you

"Nothing has changed since", one of Ms Petit's former colleagues (who prefers to remain anonymous) told me over the phone. "There are still no wash-basins on the shop floor. To wash your hands – with cold water – you have to go to the toilets or to the cafeteria where we take our lunch break, the only break we get."

In the winter, the workers have to wear woollen scarves and gloves to keep warm because the heating system doesn't work properly. The pace of work is still intense and relations with management remain terrible. "You can't speak up. If you do so, they look daggers at you", she reported. She also complained of intense pain in her legs and back, blaming it on the conveyor belt which was too low.

However, the company stopped using trichlo several years ago. "It got replaced by another product, but I don't know what", she said.

"You can't go making difficulties, not at our age", sighed the worker who, like most of her other colleagues, is in the 45-55 age bracket. This resignation is explained by the lack of realistic work alternatives for unskilled labour in a region in the throes of deindustrialisation. The complete absence of any union representation in the SME is also no help, making it difficult for these vulnerable employees to put in demands for better working conditions.

In this context, the Petit-Maresceaux couple seem quite alone in their fight. To file their claim for recognition of Laurence's cancer as an occupational disease, they have sought the help of their union. "We can't do anything at this stage. Come back when Fedris has rejected your claim", they basically told her. Fedris, the Belgian public agency in charge of compensating workers suffering from a work-related disease, is indeed not known for its generosity⁴.

Studies carried out on rodents exposed to trichloroethylene point to an increase in the incidence of tumours of the haematopoietic system (organs involved in the formation of blood cells, including bone marrow). But Fedris gives precedence to epidemiological studies. Unfortunately, these have only been able to establish a link between trichlo and cancer of the kidney⁵.

In the event of their claim being rejected by Fedris, the ex-textile worker will be forced to appeal against the decision in court – a scenario which the couple as yet cannot really envisage. But unfortunately, this is the situation facing the vast majority of victims of work-related diseases in Belgium in the 21st century. ●