

Living with toxic poisoning

In 1991 I was working as an administration officer at a school in North Queensland. I worked with two other women in a very small office and there were three other offices nearby, each with one person in them. The education department decided to put down new flooring around these offices, down the adjoining stairway and along the adjoining hallway. The new flooring was made up of coloured chips spread over the floor coated by a two part resin. At the time the flooring was being laid, the weather was very wet and humid. The two part coating would not set. It was soft to touch and smelt toxic. After complaints from office staff to the education department, the floor was patched up. This process happened about three times over a 3 year period.

During those 3 years I had a lot of time off work because I was exhausted and couldn't cope. This was hard for me as I had always been a very fit and active person, running every day and playing sport twice a week. I felt sure I was exhausted because of the fumes that I was breathing every day. Two of the other women were having similar problems. Those of us affected went from being efficient and capable workers to being barely functional.

We associated our health problems with the toxic glue smell we had been exposed to over the 3 year period. Despite my concerns, my local general practitioner didn't believe that my health problems were associated with the flooring. (He was the only GP in town, and he had been there since I was a teenager.)

The education department finally decided to scrape up the flooring. This was done over a weekend. When I returned to work there was dust from the sanding covering our office equipment, ceiling fans, and filing cabinets. The following week, a bright red, pea size lump appeared on one of my fingers. It kept growing over a couple of days. I went back to my GP and he took a biopsy. During the following week I started to break out in an itchy rash that covered from my feet to my knees, and from my elbows to my fingers. It was so itchy I had to be hospitalised – my husband drove me to hospital in the middle of the night because I just couldn't bear it any longer. He had to wake up the local petrol station owner because we didn't have enough fuel to get to the hospital, which was 50 km away. I can still remember the feeling of: 'I don't think I will make it before I lose my mind'.

At the hospital I was attended by a doctor who told me I had either been poisoned or had taken drugs. At last I was able to reveal my concerns about the toxic fumes from the flooring to a doctor who took me seriously. The hospital doctors got the results of the original biopsy I'd had taken the week before by my GP. The diagnosis was vasculitis. I was given a cortisone cream to apply and after a few days I was much better. I had a couple of weeks off work to try to recover physically and mentally. When the vasculitis was under control I went back to work. However, every time I went back to work the rash came back. Even after all this, my local GP still didn't believe my health issues were related to the flooring. It was really hard to cope with feeling so terrible and not being quite with it. The fact that the GP made us all feel like it was in our minds made it worse.

The doctor I was seeing at the hospital advised me not to go back to work. It was such a relief to have a doctor believe me and be really supportive. Because I was terrified of the rash coming back, this doctor gave me his mobile number and told me to phone him any time. I had to do this on two occasions. I became very sensitive to different chemical substances and became confused, irritable and exhausted on exposure. I was referred to a toxicologist in Sydney – it was well worth the visit. One of the things he suggested was to have regular saunas to 'sweat out' the toxins, so my husband built me a sauna! In desperation I also had all my amalgam fillings replaced – a very expensive and painful experience.

Over the 13 years since I left the school, I have very gradually improved. I can now tolerate the scent of a bit of perfume on someone without needing to sleep for most of the day. My family and I have worked hard to get to this stage. Lots of healthy food, fresh air, exercise and rest. We live on an organic farm now where I grow and make what I can, and run a home office for our business a couple of days a week. It has been a very hard thing to overcome and I have still got a way to go; I just turned 51.

Jude Nechwatal

Jude Nechwatal lives in rural North Queensland. Jude has been living with the effects of toxic poisoning for 17 years.