

The Colonial Legacy of Mercury Toxicity: The Story of Thor and a Tribute to Mark Colvin

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Margate, a picturesque town in Kent, England would be the ominous setting of a terrifying legacy to unfold thousands of miles away in South Africa. Margate was home to Thor Chemicals, the manufacturer of mercury based products.

In the late 1970s concerns were raised by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE UK) about the excessively elevated airborne levels of mercury and high levels of mercury in the workers' urine. In 1987, the HSE delivered an ultimatum to Thor Chemicals; to shut down processes or face prosecution. Thor chose to relocate to the remote semi-rural Cato Ridge, in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa in 1988.

In South Africa, Thor transformed its English mercury production process into a mercury reclamation and recycling. Escaping international and national scrutiny, Thor became the global leader in mercury waste recycling. In 1989, toxic mercury deposits were discovered in the nearby river. Workers began exhibiting symptoms of mercury poisoning. Urine levels of workers were found to be at least 12 times higher than the WHO with workers complaining of "going mad".

Protests in 1990 by non-governmental organisations and the Chemical Workers' Industrial Union (CWIU) and investigations by Dr. Mark Colvin, exposed the extent of mercury toxicity among the workers. By 1994; three workers had died from mercury poisoning and 32 workers had urine mercury levels of >200mg/l. The government Department of Labour fined Thor R13 000!

In 1994, a civil claim of culpable homicide was filed against Thor Chemicals in the court of London. In 1997 and 1998, Thor settled, paying R17million to affected workers.

Despite its 1998 announcement of the closure of its plant, more than 10 000 drums of mercury waste remained improperly stored, stockpiled with evidence of seepage into the surrounding environment as recently as 2019.

In August 2019, a fire destroyed at least 30% of the mercury waste and releasing toxic waste. In October 2019 after pressure from South African government, a Thor Chemicals subsidiary agreed to pay R300m to clean up the mercury waste and transport this to a Switzerland company.

While the cycle of exportation of hazards from Europe and back, some thirty years later is complete, in its wake the destruction of the lives of workers, their families, their communities and farming environment remains the legacy.



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