

Testimony of David Etheridge
Before the House Committee on Oversight and Reform
Subcommittee on Economic and Consumer Policy
Hearing on the Public Health Risks of Carcinogens in Consumer Products
December 10, 2019

Good afternoon Chairman Krishnamoorthi, Representative Cloud, and other members of the subcommittee. Quiet “news days” are hard to find around here lately, so I especially appreciate your presence today and your interest in this important topic.

I am David Etheridge, a Virginian, and for most of my life a Presbyterian pastor, husband, father of two and, more recently, a grandfather. At the age of 56 I was diagnosed with a rare and deadly type of cancer called peritoneal mesothelioma. Because the only known cause of mesothelioma is exposure to asbestos, my doctor and others quizzed me about my potential exposure. They asked about the places I had worked and lived and schooled; where my family members worked, and which dorms were home during my stay at the College of William and Mary. Trying to find some point of exposure to asbestos, they asked hundreds and hundreds of questions, but found no explanation.

As it turns out, my mother was a liberal user of powder. Throughout her life she used it on herself and, when I was an infant, she used talc-based *Johnson and Johnson* baby powder on me, quite liberally. From the day she brought me home from the hospital until the age of three she and my older sister covered me with baby powder every time they changed my diaper. As an adult, trusting the product that had been used on me for so long, I even used *Johnson and Johnson* baby powder on myself for a time. My sister also used the powder on herself and now she has ovarian cancer, which makes you wonder, doesn't it?

I have since learned that when talc is mined from the ground, it has impurities that are mined along with it, including asbestos fibers. It was these fibers that got into my system and migrated to my peritoneal cavity, which caused a slow-growing tumor that debilitated me at the height of my career. Baby powder containing talc was the source of my asbestos exposure, and the cause of the cancer that will kill me.

Awaiting treatment, doctors withdrew six liters of fluid from my peritoneal cavity. They did this twice, so I could breathe. Then I came here, to the Medstar Washington Hospital Center, where Dr. Paul Sugarbaker performed an eleven-hour surgery on me, removing my spleen, my entire colon, the tail of my pancreas, and six and a half pounds of cancer. He washed my insides with a strong solution of chemotherapy and sewed me back together for a 20 day stay in the hospital. On my 57th birthday they sent me home with a tube in my arm for the liquid food and antibiotics that would keep me alive for the next month, after which I endured another 15 weeks of chemo and rehab and total exhaustion.

After six months away from the church I had served, I returned to work. But nine months later more cancer was found—cancer that cannot be remedied or radiated or cured—so I resigned my position and ended the service I felt called to do from the age of sixteen and I prepared to die.

I understand that you all have friends who have cancer. I realize that 1,600 people die from cancer every single day. I am thankful that mesothelioma has not yet taken my life. But my cancer was caused by a product that is used on the most vulnerable members of our society: *infants*. In fact, the people who apply these products, like my mother and sister, are completely unaware of the suffering that may occur or the death that may follow as a result of simply drying a baby's bottom.

My case illustrates the sad truth that we cannot trust the talc industry to regulate itself in this matter. Since 1906 we have known that asbestos is deadly, and yet, somehow, it has shown up in baby powder *yet again*.

We owe it to our children, our parents, and every other consumer, to ensure that baby powder is truly safe and asbestos-free. Despite decades of promises to do so, the industry has not regulated itself, therefore you must.

Good day and God bless you in your vital work.