

NAV finally believes mercury victim

Tordis Stigen will be the first dental assistant to receive compensation for mercury poisoning. She has been fighting to be believed for 20 years.

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“There have been many confusing fights with researchers, doctors and NAV (The Norwegian Labour and Welfare Service) so it is fantastic finally to be believed,” says Stigen Klausen.

NAV took five years to deal with her case before she received a positive response at the weekend. It has been recognised that she has been suffering from an occupational illness since 1992, and so she will receive a retrospective payment of NOK 58,000.

“It is almost laughable. I have spent far greater sums of money on putting forward my case over the last 20 years,” says Stigen Klausen. However, she emphasises that the most important thing is that she and her colleagues are now believed.

“This is about recognising damage to a whole group of workers, and that is the most important thing of all,” says Stigen Klausen.

Boiled and shaped mercury

Tordis Stigen Klausen worked as a dental assistant from 1969 until 1992. She carried mercury in her hands and boiled it up over an open flame. Eventually she became ill, with loss of memory, dizziness and exhaustion. These are all symptoms of mercury poisoning, but no one would believe her.

NRK Brennpunkt, a Norwegian TV documentary programme, told her story in 2005. This resulted in new research and eventually the medical environments changed their views. A number of women were examined at the major regional hospitals and were diagnosed with mercury poisoning. Tordis Stigen Klausen was one of them, but even so her illness was not recognised as an occupational illness by the Norwegian authorities.

Waiting for NAV

“My case has been rejected and appealed in the NAV system for 5 years, in spite of the fact that I have medical statements that state categorically that I suffer from mercury poisoning. It has been quite surreal,” says Stigen Klausen.

In 2010, NRK put the spotlight on NAV’s handling of these cases. This resulted in NAV

examining its routines in these cases and now Stigen Klausen is the first dental assistant to have her illness recognised as an occupational illness by the Norwegian authorities.

Expect many more women to have their cases recognised

“This is good both for Tordis Stigen Klausen and for all the other dental assistants who became ill while working,” says Gerd Bang-Johansen, chair of the Tannhelsesekretærenes Forbund i Parat (League of Dental Assistants). She says they expect many more women to have their cases recognised as occupational illnesses.

“We have a huge number of cases to be dealt with in the NAV system and we are going to follow them closely. Many of these women have exactly the same symptoms as Stigen Klausen, and have worked with mercury a lot.”

Bang-Johansen emphasises that getting these cases handled by NAV is now a matter of urgency. Many of the women are very ill and some do not have long to live. “They deserve a decision now,” says Bang-Johansen.