

Andrea Walter,
Justine Watson
and Kim
Blieschke refuse
to stay silent

‘WE’VE
BEEN
GIVEN

A LIFE SENTENCE

Andrea Walter, Justine Watson and Kim Blieschke should never even have met.

They live in different states, are of different ages

and have very different interests.

But these brave women are connected by one tragic commonality. They have all had their lives destroyed by a 10-minute medical procedure which was promised to be an easy fix.

Mesh implants were hailed as the perfect way to treat an array of pelvic floor disorders such as incontinence, hernias and prolapsed organs – less invasive than most surgeries, quick to insert and with seemingly no side effects.

But they have had devastating impacts for hundreds of women across Australia, leading to chronic, unrelenting pain, disfigurement, inability to have sex, debilitating depression and even suicide.

For years, sufferers were fobbed off and lied to about what they were experiencing until finally in 2017, the government stepped in and introduced a partial ban – 27 years

a part

after the mesh had been introduced to the country. A class action was launched soon afterwards on behalf of 700 Australians.

At the forefront of the campaign to bring justice to the blighted lives were Watson, Walter and Blieschke – united in their pain – who wanted to make sure the company behind the mesh, Johnson & Johnson, was held accountable.

WHO sits down with them to hear how the mesh has left them physically and mentally maimed.

Kim Blieschke’s doctor first persuaded her to have the mesh after she had some common complications after childbirth. “I had some big babies,” she smiles. “Because it’s about vaginas, it’s very private and no-one wants to speak about it. A lot of women suffer in silence.”

But the procedure left her worse than before. She describes her life now as Russian roulette. “I could be in a shopping centre and my whole bladder would just release. I can only wear dark colours now,” she says. “I have to



Vaginal mesh has blighted the lives of more than 1000 Australian women. WHO sits down with three brave victims who refuse to suffer in silence



Andrea Walter says: "There is a trust between you and your doctors, but I've got to the stage where I just don't believe them."

carry three or four changes of underwear. [I've since learned] the product was never designed to go inside human bodies and especially not in the pelvis. You can't sit, you can't stand, you can't run, you can't walk, you can't have intercourse, you can't work."

The devices are stitched into the vaginal wall with a set of hooks, like a canvas grocery bag, and left there permanently to support the womb or strengthen the walls of the urethra. But after weeks in the body, the mesh usually shrinks, slicing through nerve endings, tissue and organs, and embedding itself so it can never be removed.

Walter didn't think twice when a doctor recommended the treatment. "He opened

"You can't sit, you can't stand, you can't work"

— Kim Blieschke

up his drawer and pulled out a strip of blue plastic which looked like ... you know ... when you get a new fridge and it has straps around it," Blieschke remembers. "I didn't know what it was, but he said it would take about 10 to 20 minutes to put in and the only problem would be if it didn't work."

She initially suffered an infection after the operation but the first time she realised something was wrong was during sex with her now ex-husband when a piece of the mesh cut his penis. "I thought it must be a loose stitch or something," she said.

But soon she felt a terrible pain which is still with her to this day.

As for Justine Watson, after going in for the simple procedure, she wasn't even aware



UPHILL BATTLE

Justine Watson says the fight to get help for mesh injury victims "is like going through one of those haunted houses at a show, things keep jumping out at you, the floor goes ... What's next? You can't keep passing us off. Mesh won't just disappear".

"It's a national disgrace. This is a tsunami and government resources are about to be flooded," Justine Watson says.

that the mesh would be inside her body for life. "I had no idea it was even inserted, I'm like, 'what is mesh?'"

In the years since she has spent over \$50,000 desperately trying to ease the unbearable pain. Her body's reaction to the plastic – the same type used in water bottles – led to extensive nerve damage down the whole right side of her body.

"The surgeon said, 'You're the only one who has come back in pain,'" she says. The

two other women nod in agreement as she talks. They were also told their cases were unique, even though thousands across the world were in exactly the same predicament.

As their pain worsened, the women sought answers and eventually uncovered the horrifying fact that there was no solution to the pain because the blood vessels and tissues intertwine around the tiny strands of the mesh so deeply that removing it would cause life-threatening damage.

"Because doctors couldn't take it out, they tried trimming it, but it just recoils and embeds itself further into the vaginal wall," Andrea Walter says.

After starting the Facebook group Mesh Injured Australia (MIA), the trio were contacted by hundreds of frantic women, all with their own terrifying stories. MIA Inc (meshinjuredaustralia.org.au) was soon formed to help give advice and counselling as well as campaigning for action against the manufacturer.

In one of the biggest health class actions in Australian history, the Federal Court heard that Johnson & Johnson had not adequately tested the mesh and "played down" the risks. In November, the judge ruled against the pharmaceutical giant, stating: "All the devices carried risks of complications ... against which no adequate warnings were given."

The three women were delighted with the victory, but Blieschke is furious that the government still hasn't introduced a full ban. "The partial ban was to stop the pelvic organ prolapse mesh being inserted through the vagina, but they can still insert it abdominally," she argues. "It's not a ban at all!"

The case further enraged victims when an email exchange between doctors was uncovered, claiming anal intercourse would be a solution to their ruined sex lives. "We are being gang-raped," Watson rages. "Something has been put in our vaginas involuntarily and all these people watched!"

Watson is also staggered that there has been no progress since the judgement. "There were 13 recommendations, but nothing has been done. They mean diddly squat if they're not met," she says. "The court said it was not fit for purpose, yet there are crickets – utter silence! These are women, wives and mothers, and now men are having mesh implanted. We still don't know how many people are out there suffering. The court case was validation, but these women now need help, and we are still not looking after the women who have been injured."

Globally, mesh has been linked to numerous deaths from infection, and women who feel they cannot go on living in such intense pain. In 2015, an Australian sufferer took her own life after her doctor told her nothing could be done to ease her suffering. Over 100,000 Americans have so far had the implant, and thousands more in the UK.

Exhausted, Watson says: "People are dying all the time from this. It's not good enough."

If you need help, you can talk to trained counsellors who are mesh victims themselves by calling 1800 637 433.

Kim Blieschke says: "Australia is not a Third World country. How is this still happening?"

