

Legislation helps win asbestos battle

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Bruce Vento knew from years of public service, working six years in the Minnesota Legislature and 24 years in Congress, that consensus-building was not easy, but it was necessary to achieve progress. Whether he was fighting to protect the environment or advance workers' concerns, he knew he had to find common ground with very different-minded colleagues in order to bring meaningful change to the American people and the world.

Even after being diagnosed with mesothelioma in January 2000, stemming from exposure to asbestos while working his way through college in factories and a brewery 40 years earlier, Bruce continued to be a fighter -- not just for his life but for the lives of tens of thousands of people who would face the same cancer and be given so little hope of recovery.

Although Bruce lost his battle with mesothelioma just 10 months later, he would have found hope on Oct. 4 when the U.S. Senate unanimously passed legislation to ban most asbestos-containing materials (materials with asbestos concentrations of 1 percent or less by weight are not covered) and begin federal investment in the research critically needed to develop effective treatments and, perhaps even one day, a cure.

This bipartisan achievement is remarkable, given the makeup of the Senate. Tenacious leaders such as Democratic Sens. Patty Murray of Washington and Barbara Boxer of California reached across the aisle to Republican Sen. Johnny Isakson. And with the support of their hard-working and skillful staff members, they found agreement and resolution, moving our country much closer to completely banning asbestos. Those who criticize them for not hammering out a stronger bill have little appreciation for the political climate in Washington, D.C., and the power of the veto pen held by a president willing to use it.

Since 1999, the Mesothelioma Applied Research Foundation has awarded more than \$4 million in research grants to study this dreaded cancer. That is an essential start, but just a drop in the bucket compared with what is needed. Murray's bill authorizes federal funds of \$10 million per year for medical research so that tens of thousands of people who were exposed to asbestos decades ago and may be diagnosed with mesothelioma in the future can benefit from better therapies. Like Bruce, they will be in the fight of their lives. This important legislation will help them win that battle.

Susan Vento was married to the late Rep. Bruce Vento, D-Minn., and serves on the board of directors of the Mesothelioma Applied Research Foundation.