

Asbestos – the hidden killer

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Ask 100 people in the street about asbestos and you will probably hear a sharp intake of breath, a comment about how nasty it is, and an observation that it's mostly a thing of the past and not a current concern for them. Well two of these bits of information are correct! Asbestos is still the biggest cause of occupational lung disease in the world (including NZ) and for most people it doesn't impinge on their consciousness in the way that mining or forestry or quad bikes do. Yet this is exactly why asbestos continues to be such a problem.

First a few facts:

- At least 200 Kiwis die from asbestos related diseases each year and the number appears to be rising. This compares to around 75 who die each year in workplace accidents.
- Being a smoker significantly increases your vulnerability to asbestos related diseases.
- The importation of products containing asbestos (ACMs) has not been banned in NZ (unlike Europe and Australia).
- There are hundreds of different building products that contain asbestos including vinyl flooring and textured ceilings as well as the better known Super 6 or Fibrolite.
- Hundreds of thousands of buildings in NZ still contain asbestos, much of which is deteriorating with age and hence increasing in risk.
- Many removal jobs carried out in the 1980s and 90s were not done well and there is still residual asbestos contamination around.
- There is no explicit obligation for building owners to routinely survey their properties for the presence of ACMs or to monitor its condition.
- There is no such thing as an OSH/DoL/WorkSafe "approved" asbestos contractor. Only individuals who supervise restricted work with asbestos have to hold a Certificate of Competence.
- The level of awareness of where to find ACMs is very low.
- The people most at risk now are tradies, especially builders, electricians, plumbers, telecoms, demolition contractors and those handling building

What's in that dust?



waste. DIYers are also putting themselves and their families at risk.

- We are at least 10 years behind international best practice when it comes to our approach to asbestos.
- There is a major review underway of the 1998 Asbestos Regulations and two new Approved Codes of Practice are due in 2015. These will impose significant new obligations on all parties. In addition, new duties and penalties in the Health and Safety Reform Bill are currently before Parliament.

So what do I need to know and do?

The first step, as always, is to undertake an assessment.

- Do I have ACMs in my buildings? If so, what form is it in, what condition is it in and how likely are staff or others to be exposed to any fibres?
- Am I likely to be carrying out any work that might disturb ACMs – for example re-cladding or roofing a building?
- Am I likely to come across ACMs in contaminated land – for example excavation of former industrial sites?
- Is anyone likely to bring ACMs onto my site in the form of construction or demolition waste or scrap metal?
- How would I know what to look for, when to test and how to respond if I do find it?
- Do I have access to competent advice to ensure I don't either get ripped off or fail to manage the risk properly?
- Do my staff and contractors know about any asbestos issues in my business and what they should be doing to keep themselves safe?

- What are my consent conditions and how do I ensure I'm not going to breach them?

We recently undertook asbestos awareness training for a quarry operator with cleanfill sites across NZ. Within days of completing this training their tip staff had begun to identify suspect materials and either reject or quarantine loads pending testing. Previously these loads could have been dumped with a consequent risk to staff and neighbours and the potential for a huge fine from the council.

Events like the Canterbury earthquake have highlighted the scale of the problem but even without this our asbestos epidemic was likely to continue as post-war buildings reach the end of their life and get refurbished or demolished.

Asbestos is today's problem and will cause tomorrow's premature deaths. Are you playing your part in shedding light on the hidden killer in your business? More information can be found at: www.business.govt.nz/worksafe/information-guidance/all-guidance-items/asbestos-factsheets



Asbestos in a burned out building.

Cosman Parkes is a specialist health and safety consultancy working with business leaders to rethink workplace safety. We have over 50 years combined experience and are Chartered Members of the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health and Members of the Institute of Directors.

Mike leads the NZDAA Asbestos Committee and sits on the WorkSafe Asbestos Guidance Group. He provides asbestos management advice and training to a range of clients in the property, construction, housing, energy and telecoms sectors as well as to WorkSafe NZ.