

Project to Improve the Asbestos Management in Schools and Colleges

The Problem

Most schools in the country contain asbestos, all of it is old and much of it is deteriorating. Frequent asbestos incidents have released significant levels of asbestos fibres, and tests have shown that in some schools everyday classroom activities can release dangerous levels of asbestos fibres into the classrooms. There is no minimum level of exposure to asbestos below which there is no risk. All exposures are cumulative and potentially contribute towards the development of the asbestos related cancer, mesothelioma.

Sadly the end result is that the occupants of schools and colleges are dying of mesothelioma with the number of teachers and lecturers in schools, higher and further education with the disease increasing year on year. A total of 272 died between 1980-2005 – 21 of these were in the period 1980-1985 and 92 in the period 2001-2005. The teachers are however the tip of the iceberg because for every teacher there are twenty to thirty children at risk. They are more vulnerable to the effects of asbestos, but because of the long latency they do not develop the disease for decades after the exposure, so their deaths are not recorded as the result of asbestos exposure at school. In the USA they estimated that 1,000 teachers and children would subsequently die from asbestos exposure in their schools with 90% of those being children.

While the Government acknowledges that its policy of managing rather than removing asbestos carries risks, it has not allocated resources so that schools can effectively manage their asbestos, and neither has it assessed the scale of the problem or the risks. All the teaching unions are concerned at the growing number of asbestos related deaths in their profession and the lack of a proportionate response from the Government to address this serious problem.

The project

Because of the Government's reluctance to act, the teacher unions have joined with the asbestos consultants' association ATaC on a project to improve asbestos management in schools. The first step is a pilot to assess the effectiveness of asbestos management in 100 schools.

A consultant will check the asbestos surveys and management plans and carry out on-the-ground inspections to assess the schools' systems of asbestos management. If improvements need to be made, advice will be given. Schools will remain anonymous, experienced asbestos consultants will carry out the assessment and there will be no charge to schools.

The information will be collated in a report, which will form the basis of guidance and training courses so that all schools can achieve the standards of the best. The report will also be presented to Parliament.

Another objective of the pilot is to trial and perfect systems of air sampling. Present systems only identify the easily accessible materials, do not spot the hidden asbestos and almost never discover whether there are dangerous airborne asbestos fibres which can be inhaled by the occupants.

The ultimate aim is to develop practical and effective systems for non-intrusive, widespread air or electrostatic sampling to take place in many schools. This will help to discover whether hidden,

damaged and deteriorating asbestos materials are releasing asbestos fibres into the rooms. This will allow targeted remedial measures to be taken where there is a real risk.

This is an important project and is the first step in improving asbestos management in schools. It is supported by all the other teaching unions. There is much to be gained by being part of the initial project, for the assessment will identify any weaknesses in the present standards of asbestos management and advise on improvements, and all of this will be at no cost or embarrassment to the school. So that the project can succeed it requires schools to volunteer for an assessment to take place.

To volunteer your school or for further information please contact your teaching union or John Richards or Neil Peacock the asbestos consultants association project team:

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