

Asbestos still a persistent problem in South Africa

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Asbestos trust Kgalagadi Relief Trust (KRT) chair **Brian Gibson** announced at the Asbestos Regulations Workshop, in August, that asbestos pollution is still a persistent problem in South Africa.

The fibrous mineral causes life threatening diseases that are difficult to diagnose.

Asbestos Relief Trust (ART) chair **Phiroshaw Camay** said that the total extent of the environmental pollution by asbestos in South Africa was unknown. The fibrous mineral had been used in the country for more than 100 years for insulation, as well as other uses.

The KRT and the ART were formed with the aim of compensating individuals who were exposed to asbestos from qualifying sources and who developed compensable asbestos-related diseases as a result.

Asbestos Legislation

The Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (Deat) gazetted the asbestos banning regulations on March 28, 2008.

The legislation prohibits the import or export of asbestos or asbestos containing materials (ACMs), excluding material in transit through the country, and prohibits the acquisition, processing or repackaging of asbestos and the manufacture or distribution of asbestos or ACMs.

It allows manufacturers and merchants a 120-day period of grace, which has since expired, to clear their shelves of asbestos or ACMs, and allows a phase-out period for a limited number of ACMs, such as heat- and arc-resistant electrical insulation board, acetylene gas cylinders, gaskets, seals and insulation materials.

Gibson explained that the manufacturers of certain specialised applications, where there was no asbestos-free substitute, could apply for special permission from Deat to continue manufacturing these products, but the companies had to provide a phase-out plan of the use of the fibrous mineral. There were also asbestos regulations published by the Department of Labour to ensure that anyone continuing to work with the substance was properly protected.

In practice, the banning regulations mean that no ACM may be imported into South Africa after March 28, 2008, except for the purposes of transit to another country. After July 28, 2008, it became an offence to acquire, process, package or repackage, manufacture or distribute these products.

Gibson explained that asbestos might, however, still be imported into South Africa for research or analysis. This included efforts to detoxify the fibres, a technique being considered for large areas of the country that were heavily polluted with asbestos.

Asbestos waste might also be imported into the country for immediate disposal from Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries that were unable to dispose of the waste themselves.

The illegal use of asbestos carried a fine not exceeding R100 000, or 10 years in prison, or both. Fines exceeding three times the commercial value of the product could also be issued.

Waste Disposal

Gibson said there were a number of South African waste sites that were capable of handling asbestos-containing waste, but special procedures for the disposal were necessary and permits were essential.

Asbestos disposal is a major challenge around the world, and some SADC countries had limited facilities to dispose of and deal with asbestos waste. Gibson said South Africa was willing to assist its neighbours until such time as they are capable of dealing with their own hazardous waste.

Gibson said that after three years, the amount of waste coming into South Africa should be analysed, and suggestions for more efficient and logical ways of dealing with the waste should be contemplated.

This legislation focused on trying to stop the production and use of asbestos, but it did not resolve the enormous environmental contamination or the problem of existing asbestos still found all over South Africa. Gibson said that almost all citizens lived in houses containing asbestos in some form or another.

He said many products already in place had a lifespan of 70 or more years. Although high-density asbestos containing products did not present an immediate risk, they should be carefully managed when removed and dumped at the end of the natural lifespan.

There was also the problem of wind-dispersed asbestos, especially in some former mining areas such as Kgalagadi or Penge. Gibson said some areas were so severely polluted that no human habitation should be allowed.

Camay added that a fair amount of raw asbestos tailings had been used to build schools and classrooms.

Risk Prevention

Gibson explained that during the last century, asbestos was a popular raw material for building materials. Fibres were mixed with cement to make durable asbestos cement. Asbestos fibres had been replaced in commercially available products, but some rural communities still made their own bricks, which could release fibres into their homes.

He said these should be plastered and painted to trap the asbestos, and roofs should also be painted over.

People should be educated as to what asbestos looked like and what precautions should be taken to prevent exposure to the fibres.

Companies had to declare where there was asbestos in a building, or employ an expert to say if and where it existed. Gibson said this should be followed by a risk management plan, which should include proper gear and health surveillance for the lifetime of a person once work involving any asbestos containing product or service started.

Workers who had been exposed to asbestos should undergo lifelong surveillance and employers should undertake the responsibility for this.

Former National Centre for Occupational Health director **Tony Davies** delivered a note of hope with his comment that South Africa might be slow in combating the asbestos problem, but that a difference was being made. The risk to the general population was decreasing, as people were becoming aware of the dangers of asbestos.

Davies said focus had to be placed on preventing any further risk or disease. He added that nonprofit government organisations could use this opportunity to become involved in educating people about asbestos risks and the asbestos legacy.

Public Awareness

The trusts aimed to initiate drives for general public awareness and education of the issue. The last time there was an awareness campaign was the 1998 Asbestos Summit. Gibson said the danger of asbestos seemed to have slipped off the public agenda. He said a public education campaign should be developed so that the public could better understand asbestos and the dangers of it.

He said the historical exposure to the substance was immense, but that everyone could contribute to prevention of further risk. Employers needed to make a conscious effort to protect workers from the dangers of asbestos.

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