

Despite widespread ban on asbestos, several countries continue to produce the mineral fibre

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While 52 countries worldwide had banned the use of asbestos by March this year, Canada, Brazil, Columbia, Zimbabwe, China, Kazakhstan and Russia remain some of the leading producers of the mineral fibre, with production increasing in Asia and the Middle East.

According to the World Health Organisation, about 125-million people across the world are exposed to asbestos in the workplace, with an estimated 107 000 dying each year from asbestos-related lung cancer, mesothelioma and asbestosis.

The US Geological Survey says there are 200-million tons of identified asbestos resources worldwide. In 2009, 255 000 t of asbestos was mined in Brazil, 180 000 t in Canada, 280 000 t in China, 230 000 t in Kazakhstan, one-million tons in Russia and 50 000 t in Zimbabwe.

Some experts believe that, by 2030, asbestos will have claimed as many as ten-million lives around the world. This is one of the key points highlighted in 'Dangers in the Dust: Inside the Global Asbestos Trade', a study based on extensive research conducted in eight countries by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists and reporters and producers from the BBC's International News Services.

The study documents the asbestos industry's activities in Brazil, Canada, China, India, Mexico, Russia and the US, and points out that the industry has spent about \$100-million since the mid-1980s to ensure that the asbestos trade continues.

In South Africa, asbestos has been banned, but there is still significant concern about the rehabilitation and cleanup of primary and secondary asbestos pollution.

These concerns were emphasised at the Asbestos Relief Trust (ART) and Kgalagadi Relief Trust (KRT) annual general meeting, held in Gauteng late last month.

ART chairperson **Jan de Bruyn** says that, without proper rehabilitation, communities living in polluted areas will have a lifelong risk of developing asbestos-related diseases, including mesothelioma, which is fatal.

"The provision of compensation to qualifying asbestos sufferers can neither deal with nor substitute this need. There is no cure for asbestos-related diseases and exposure avoidance and prevention are critical. This is an issue on which government, affected communities and interested parties must continue to work together," he adds.

KRT chairperson **Brian Gibson** says that it is critical that primary and secondary sources of asbestos pollution be rehabilitated to reduce and stop exposure to asbestos and the future development of asbestos-related diseases in affected communities. There is an urgent need for information and education on these dangers, he says.

The KRT continues to work closely with community-based organisations and other stakeholders in former asbestos- mining communities on issues that affect those that may qualify for compensation from the trust as well as their families.

These issues include inadequate healthcare facilities for those exposed to asbestos and who continue to live in former asbestos-mining communities, and a lack of hospice facilities for asbestos-related cancer sufferers in the Northern Cape.

There is also a lack of heart disease diagnostic facilities and lung-removal surgery facilities or even postmortem services at certain State hospitals catering for former asbestos-mining communities. "This is important for the purposes of claiming compensation from the State and the trust in cases where the deceased or former miner died without lodging and/or finalising a claim for compensation," says Gibson.

Meanwhile, the ART had, by July this year, paid R200-million to 3 112 claimants since its inception. Its founders started the trust with a contribution of R396,7-million, and the ART still has some R320-million available for future beneficiaries despite the fact that former asbestos-mining company Gefco's contribution of R13-million has been depleted and the contribution of R7,7-million from Msauli, another former asbestos-mining company, is almost exhausted.

De Bruyn says that the number of new enquiries received by the ART has more than halved in the current financial year, from a monthly average of 77 in the last financial year to an average of 24 cases in the first five months of the current financial year.

"The trustees do not believe that this sharp decline is an anomaly. It is worth noting that, in a recent report, our actuary estimated that, from March 2011, the number of new claimants would reduce by some 50% a year," he adds.

He says that, while enquiries will continue, most potential claimants have registered with the ART and have already been through the claims process.

At the end of February this year, the number of claims lodged with the KRT had increased to 2 853, compared with 2426 at the end of February 2009. From July 2006 to February 28, 2010, the KRT paid a total of R60,8-million to 965 claimants.

The KRT has contributed to a number of social projects in communities affected by the legacy of asbestos, predominantly in the Northern Cape. About R506 908 had been invested in social responsibility projects by the end of February.

The KRT trustees also agreed to implement a new model for the award of compensation to qualifying claimants backdated to March 1, 2010.

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