

Worldwide asbestos epidemic

The asbestos epidemic which has cost so many lives in western industrialized countries in the 20th Century now seems set for a replay in the newly industrialising countries of Asia and South America in the 21st Century, according to Dr Ken Purse of the University of Adelaide (*J Occup Health Safety-Aust NZ*, 21 (1)21-26). With the loss of their markets in Europe and North America, asbestos producers have shifted their focus to the emerging markets in Asia and South America despite overwhelming understanding of the deadly nature of the product. China, Brazil and India have now joined Russia as the world's largest consumers of asbestos.

Dr Purse argues for an extension of national import bans which are currently in place in 40 countries. He says governments, scientists, trade unions and public health agencies all have important roles to play if the global asbestos epidemic is to be defeated and not just shifted to the newly industrializing countries of the developing world.

Queensland Enforcement Framework Review Report

An opportunity to address deficiencies in Queensland OHS laws has been identified in the Stuart-Crompton Report released in January.

Following outrageous limitations placed on unions last year regarding inspector activity, unions have called for a range of measures including inspector feedback and the right to take conciliation & arbitration action. Whilst firm recommendations were not made on these requests supportive comments give us confidence that forthcoming Ministerial discussions will see a breakthrough.

The Report made clear recommendations on removing Crown immunity, publishing prosecution information and clarification of enforcement and advisory inspectorate roles.

Comcare review

Newly elected Deputy PM Julia Gillard has announced the Terms of Reference for a review of the Comcare scheme. The Review will look at whether the scheme provides appropriate OHS legislative coverage and whether it has enforcement policies and operational capacity to ensure safe workplaces.

The government has promised a moratorium on private companies entering the scheme whilst the review is being conducted. Unfortunately, it has agreed to allow those companies who have already applied to join the scheme and are awaiting approval for their employees remain in what the review may well determine is an inadequate scheme.

Workplace Relations Ministerial Council says ASCC to go

The first meeting of WRMC since the election of the Rudd government agreed to replace the Australian Safety and Compensation Commission (ASCC) with a 'new independent national body'. ASCC was set up to replace NOHSC by the previous government and was buried in the Department.

A new independent body will be at arm's length from the political process, backed by legislation and will have a genuine tripartite focus, we hope.

OHS harmonisation a priority

High on the agenda of the first WRMC meeting was the issue of OHS harmonisation. Deputy PM Julia Gillard told the meeting that this was an election commitment and that it was a priority for the government.

The meeting agreed that model legislation was the best way to achieve harmonisation and supported a review of its development. Terms of reference and priority areas will be finalised by mid February and submissions will be called for. Unions will need to ensure model legislation is not based on mediocre or minimum standards that exist in some states.

Work related infectious disease in Australia

A review published in the *Journal of Occupational Health and Safety* (2006, 22(4) 303-319) has concluded that a wide range of Australian workers are at risk of developing some form of work related infection. The main occupational groups at risk include healthcare workers, childcare workers, agricultural workers and meat and livestock workers. Some of these cases will be relatively minor but many will result in significant morbidity.

Vaccination of workers at risk is the most effective approach when an effective vaccine is available. This is the case for hep A, hep B, Q fever tuberculosis, measles, rubella, influenza, polio, tetanus and lyssavirus.

Studies show that many at risk groups are not fully vaccinated. A recent Melbourne study found that only one quarter of surveyed health workers were fully vaccinated.

Govt must plug fine loophole

A recent Courier Mail report identified 94 Queensland companies with outstanding OHS fines. Analysis of a sample of 19 of these showed that 10 had been deregistered, 4 were under administration and 1 was currently being struck off.

Deregistered companies and those in administration avoid their liability to pay fines levied for breach of OHS legislation. The fines that had been avoided ranged from \$3,500 to \$40,000.

If companies are allowed to get away with this, the already inadequate fines applying in Queensland will be easily avoided and will diminish the deterrent effect. Industrial Relations Minister John Mickel has stated that the government is looking at ways to close the loophole.