

ASBESTOS: IT'S STILL A KILLER!



In March 1995 the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) held a Press Conference on asbestos. Here Professor Julian Peto – an expert on asbestos related deaths – revealed what some campaigners had thought all along: asbestos was causing more deaths than previously estimated. It had been anticipated that towards the end of the 1990s, asbestos related deaths would be decreasing. Professor Peto revealed the opposite.

At the Press Conference it was stated that over the next 30 years, asbestos related deaths would increase considerably. The reason for this was related to the incidental exposure to asbestos fibres having more impact than previously thought. Prior to Professor Peto's evaluation of asbestos related deaths – particularly the asbestos specific mesothelioma cancer – it was thought those mainly at risk were workers who continuously worked with asbestos. Those working with asbestos insulation or making asbestos products were well represented in the national Mesothelioma register.

However, Professor Peto also discovered that workers who were exposed to asbestos fibres only occasionally were also at risk. Occupations that had higher risk of Mesothelioma included Gas Service Engineers and construction workers, particularly carpenters, electricians and plumbers.

The GMB trade union had been heavily involved in lobbying for more effective controls on asbestos exposure in the 1980s when David Gee was the union's National Health and Safety Officer. The GMB was a very significant force behind the original Asbestos Licensing Regulations 1983. These regulations required all asbestos removal contractors to be licensed and follow working methods to reduce asbestos exposure. Hence when Professor Peto published his updated statistics, it had a major impact.

The GMB Campaign

In 1995, the GMB launched the 'Asbestos: It's Still a Killer' Campaign. Over 5 years, the campaign was a major success in both pressing for greater legal controls, improved preventative measures and a ban on asbestos materials in both the UK and European Union. This campaign included:

-  publishing a leaflet and poster raising awareness of the hazards of Asbestos;
-  publishing 4 guides on preventing exposure to Asbestos;
-  producing a video identifying where asbestos can be commonly found in buildings;
-  organising several public conferences in London, Glasgow, Newcastle, Perth and Nottingham to offer advice on dealing with Asbestos and raise awareness of the dangers associated with exposure to the fibres;
-  organising many seminars in different parts of the UK;
-  holding workplace action weeks on Asbestos;
-  supporting HSE initiatives on raising awareness of Asbestos issues;

- ☠ representing the GMB on a HSE Working Group reviewing Asbestos Regulation in the UK;
- ☠ promoting the GMB Campaign at major health and safety exhibitions in 1996, 1997, 1998; and 1999.
- ☠ putting the case for a ban on White Asbestos to the European Commission directly;
- ☠ presenting campaign information to a group of industrialists, European Members of Parliament and European Commission staff at a Seminar in Brussels;
- ☠ repeating the call for a ban on White Asbestos at a key European health and safety conference in Bilbao, Spain in September 1997;
- ☠ presenting the case for an asbestos ban at the Council of Europe Social Committee in November 1997, where GMB Director of Health and Environment was called as an expert witness against the continued use of asbestos. The GMB were present at the full plenary of the Council of Europe, in April 1998, when the Council adopted a Report recommending a ban on all forms of Asbestos across its' 40 Member States;
- ☠ lobbying both Parliament and the European Commission about implementing a European wide ban on Asbestos products. This assisted in the UK banning white asbestos in 1999 and the European Union implementing a ban from 2005 across all Member States;
- ☠ joining with the Health and Safety Executive on a Working Group supported by the European Commission to develop practical guidelines for training asbestos removal workers across all Member States; and
- ☠ being represented by Nigel Bryson as a UK delegate to the European Commission's Senior Labour Inspectors Committee (SLIC) which reviewed the asbestos controls in France, Spain, Sweden and the UK in the year 2000.

The Asbestos: It's Still a Killer initiative was relaunched in November 2001 in the Civic Centre in Newcastle. The Director General of the HSE, Timothy Walker, used the GMB conference to launch the Consultation Document on the new duty to manage asbestos in buildings. It is a reflection of how the HSE viewed the GMB's work on asbestos that the launch date of the document was put back so that it could be launched at the GMB organised conference.

Today

According to the most recent statistics, 2,538 (2013) died from Mesothelioma. The HSE estimate that for every Mesothelioma death, there will be one death due to lung cancer causes by asbestos exposure. In addition, in 2013 there were 217 deaths where asbestosis was the specific underlying cause recorded on the death certificate. So in 2013 5,293 people are estimated to have died from asbestos related disease.

The death rates are expected to peak over the next two years. Yet the legacy of asbestos deaths will continue well into the 21st Century.

While the legal protection was recently updated in the Control of Asbestos Regulations 2012, the workers most at risk of being exposed to asbestos fibres today are construction workers. Yet health and safety standards in parts of the construction sector remain poor. In a recent 'intensive inspection, by the HSE they visited 2,274 small refurbishment sites. During these visits it was found 42% 'of sites fell below standards'. 983 'notifications of contraventions' were issued: include in these were 432 Prohibition Notices and 260 improvement notices. Most of this enforcement action related to safety breaches.

If a significant number of construction employers cannot protect workers from the most visible safety hazards, how are workers likely to be protected from the invisible asbestos fibres?

This note is to highlight the work that the GMB did in:

- ☠ keeping pressure on the Government to improve regulatory controls over asbestos and introducing a ban on all asbestos materials;
- ☠ work with asbestos contractors and the HSE to improve preventative and protective standards where people worked;
- ☠ working with various groups to support those who suffered illness due to their exposure to asbestos; and
- ☠ raising awareness of asbestos hazards in the workforce.

It is difficult to see what non-union workers did collectively to lobby for these improvements. Yet the current Government have introduced a Trade Union Bill which aims to make it harder for safety representatives to function effectively, particularly in public services. This needs to be challenged.

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PEOPLE SUPPORT WHAT THEY HELP CREATE

One of the original posters the GMB used to raise awareness of asbestos hazards.



asbestos – a breath with death

About 25% of the 4,000 people who die of asbestos related diseases used to work in the Construction Sector. The GMB is campaigning to prevent people being exposed to deadly asbestos fibres. To find out more contact your GMB Representative or visit our website at: www.gmb.org.uk/health&safety

Your GMB Safety Representative is:



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MIDLANDS



Asbestos
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