

HIDDEN KILLER IN YOUR SCHOOL?

A March 2012 report from an All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) has warned of a Hidden Killer in our schools that everyone needs to be aware of. This letter is intended to equip GMB members who are working in and using our schools with the tools they need to make sure they and their families remain safe.

THE DANGER

Any exposure to asbestos fibres in your school can cause both lung cancer and another fatal cancer of the lining of the lung called mesothelioma. The fibres from asbestos are very small and can even be released when doors slam or when staff or pupils put up school work on walls and boards containing asbestos. Once in the air these fibres can be inhaled and may cause damage to lungs over a period of time.

THE SCALE OF THE PROBLEM

Over 75% of schools across the UK contain some asbestos. This is because all those schools built or refurbished since the Second World War, up until 1990, would have used Asbestos Containing Materials (ACM'S). These asbestos containing materials were often used to; amongst other things insulate heating systems, including pipes and to prevent fire spreading. The danger is greatest when building work is undertaken.

GMB is also concerned that with schools moving to Academy Status and out of Local Authority control, it increases the chances that no one will be looking after the needs of the pupils and staff, this will make the potential for exposure even greater.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE

Read the Report: this telling extract shows more clearly than anything else the danger in our schools from this hidden killer”

“As the asbestos materials deteriorate the number of school teachers dying from mesothelioma has increased, from three a year in the 1980s to 16 a year in the latest period. More than 228 school teachers have died of mesothelioma since 1980, with 140 dying in the last ten years. School caretakers, cleaners, cooks, secretaries, teaching assistants and nursery nurses have also died of the cancer.”

GMB says you need to take notice of any proposals for building work to be done at your school. The danger is when asbestos is disturbed and exposed to the air. As soon as you are aware of any plans to disrupt the infrastructure of the school buildings contact the ‘Duty Holder’ in your school. This will be a senior person usually the Head Teacher or Chair of Governors. They are responsible for ensuring that asbestos is managed properly in the school and staff and pupils are not endangered by its presence. It is their duty to know if asbestos is present and establish exactly where all the asbestos is located. They normally do this with a survey of all school buildings and mark the affected areas. They will also take a decision whether to have the asbestos removed, depending on its condition. If it is to be removed this must be done by a formally accredited contractor.

WHY ISN'T ALL ASBESTOS REMOVED ANYWAY?

Because the cost of removal is high the government's position is that if asbestos is in good condition, with little chance of fibres being released then the asbestos should be left until the end of the life of the building.

GMB disagrees with this position and believes that there should be a planned phased removal of asbestos from all schools beginning with those where the asbestos is in a poor condition and likely to cause harm.

WHAT GMB IS CALLING FOR

GMB believes that the six point recommendations in the APPG booklet (attached to this letter or download at www.gmb.org.uk/asbestosinschools) are a good start for making school staff and parents aware of the problem and how to deal with the immediate problem. The six points are:

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The government should set up a programme for the phased removal of asbestos from all schools, with priority being given to those schools where the asbestos is considered to be the most dangerous or damaged.

Standards in asbestos training should be set and all the training should be mandatory, and this training should be properly funded.

It is recommended that the Department for Education (DfE) and the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) jointly develop asbestos guidance specifically for schools and that the current standards be reviewed.

A policy of openness should be adopted. Parents, teachers and support staff should be annually updated on the presence of asbestos in their school and the measures that are being taken to manage it.

Pro-active inspections to determine the standards of asbestos management should be re-instated with a view to reducing future costs.

Data should be collected centrally on the extent, type and condition of asbestos in schools and this becomes an integral part of the data collection of the condition of the nation's schools.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU THINK YOU ARE OR HAVE BEEN INADVERTENTLY EXPOSED TO ASBESTOS IN YOUR SCHOOL

If you discover, or even suspect, that you have been exposed to asbestos please act immediately.

Notify the 'DUTY HOLDER' so that they can safely isolate the area where exposure occurred and ensure that no-one enters it until the asbestos has been dealt with by Accredited Asbestos Removal Contractors.

The 'DUTY HOLDER' should make sure that the contractors brought in to clean up any residual asbestos are properly trained and use the right equipment and follow the correct procedures.

You should insist that the HSE is notified of all the details of the exposure.

You should register yourself and other GMB members' on the regional asbestos exposure register. (This is a GMB Members only register).

CONCLUSION

Make sure that everyone you know is aware of this problem in our schools. Most people will have contact with our schools at some point whether it's taking their children into school, working there, attending school performances or volunteering to help with the school activities or parents evenings.

Exposure to asbestos may not seem that dangerous when it happens which is due to the very long period that it takes for health problems resulting from the exposure to develop into a cancer. This can be as long as 15 to 50 years. There are still some people who believe that white asbestos is not dangerous. This is untrue as ALL types of asbestos are dangerous. Over 4,000 people die from asbestos related diseases every year in the UK and increasingly these include school staff and former pupils.

For more information go to GMB's information website at www.gmb.org.uk

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