

# Asbestos – Not a Problem of the past

Though asbestos has been banned in the European Union since 2005, it continues to represent a considerable threat to the health of workers and the population at large. The former are particularly exposed when working in buildings that were constructed using asbestos products, and the older the building, the greater the risk. To halt perpetuation of this health scourge, and prevent the risks from being passed on to younger generations, immediate and vigorous steps to tackle asbestos removal must be taken by European and national authorities.

**Stephen Schindler**

*European Federation of Building and Woodworkers*

**Workers from an asbestos disposal company make their way to a warehouse where the roof of asbestos cement has caught fire. Duisbourg, February 2015.**  
Image: © Belga



Once hailed as an almost magical material, praised for its unique qualities in terms of durability and resistance to heat, fire, electricity and chemicals, along with the low cost of mining and production, asbestos was the raw material of choice for an almost infinite range of applications. Although asbestos was already used in ancient Greece to create fire-proof cloth, pottery and lamp wicks, it was not used on a large scale before the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The material qualities of asbestos made it ideal for solving the many technical challenges arising from industrialisation, for example in gaskets for moving machine parts that needed to be durable and heat-resistant at the same time. The medical community quickly became aware of the adverse health effects of this deadly substance in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when cases of asbestos-related mortalities were diagnosed and documented. Despite this knowledge however, the use of asbestos continued, reaching its heyday only after World War Two, when it was used in ever greater amounts in a continuously growing number of products in industry and building construction. However, as the number of applications grew, so did awareness of its adverse health effects, leading to a shift in public opinion and the gradual ban of the substance in many EU Member States throughout the 1980s and 1990s, followed by a full EU-wide ban in 2005.

Despite the ban on its production and use in the EU, asbestos continues to pose a significant health threat to this day. This is particularly the case for workers in the construction sector, but also for private "Do-It-Yourself" workers, inhabitants of asbestos-infested buildings and workplaces, and the general public. With an estimated 47 000 annual asbestos-related deaths in Europe alone, the substance takes a greater toll on human life than traffic-related deaths (25 000-30 000 a year). Yet public awareness is dwindling and knowledge about the dangers of asbestos is fading away as older workers retire and a new generation with little experience of the dangers of the substance take their place. Considering the relatively low rate of asbestos removal in the EU today, it is evident that the existing asbestos stock will continue to claim a significant number of lives for decades to come.

### Challenges for the construction sector – no end in sight

Identifying asbestos-containing products can be a tricky business. Sometimes they are easily detectable and located in plain sight, such as in the case of asbestos-cement roofs. All too often however they remain hidden in virtually every part of a building or structure, such as its flooring, windows, insulation and heating and cooling systems. This puts workers conducting maintenance, renovation or demolition at risk of exposure to asbestos fibres on a regular basis, yet they are often unaware of the dangers and in most countries lack the necessary awareness training and safety precautions.

Awareness training is highly important as it is the only way for workers conducting maintenance, renovation or demolition tasks to identify potential sources of asbestos visually in order to protect themselves. Nonetheless, it is of the utmost importance that building owners and employers make an assessment of harmful substances through sampling and lab analysis before commencing major works. This is necessary to protect workers and inhabitants as asbestos fibres, once released, cannot be detected without technical equipment. In practice this is not done consistently.

Even when the amounts of inhaled fibres on a given day might be small, the scientific community agrees that there are no safe exposure limits and, together with the accumulated exposure over a working career, the risk of falling ill with mesothelioma, asbestosis or another asbestos-related disease is very high.<sup>1</sup>

Given the long latency period of asbestos-related diseases, which can last for up to thirty or forty years, employers and employees alike often perceive asbestos as an abstract threat without immediate consequences and therefore pay too little attention to potential dangers until it is too late. In addition, some could argue that there is little incentive for employers to take appropriate safety measures since they will not be held accountable after the typically long latency periods, especially since many countries leave the burden of proof with the victims.

1. The 18<sup>th</sup> Collegium Ramazzini statement: The global health dimensions of asbestos and asbestos related diseases, *Scandinavian Journal of Work Environment and Health*, (42), 86-90, 2016.

In light of these dangers, the construction sector will have to face the challenge of eradicating asbestos from the European building stock and protecting workers from its hazards during the course of their working career. Currently, lack of awareness and asbestos removal planning mean that the issue of dealing with the problem is postponed to a later time. For example, maintenance workers sometimes rely on old stocks of asbestos-containing spare parts that they continue to install in buildings. Likewise, painters, electricians and floor tilers conducting renovation on parts of a building may accidentally encounter and handle asbestos-containing products, exposing themselves and potentially leaving elements behind that will continue to pose a risk for the next generation of workers and inhabitants.

### Situation in Europe today

Today the situation varies widely across Member States. In many Central and Eastern European countries, the widespread use of asbestos cement roofs is considered the biggest concern. Urgent action is needed to replace these, as the material deteriorates over time as a result of outdoor weather conditions, releasing fibres into the environment. This makes asbestos cement roofs and other outdoor applications a main source of so-called environmental exposure for inhabitants, workers and the general public. The Netherlands faced a similar situation, and put in place a programme for the removal of asbestos cement roofs. However, Poland is currently the only EU Member State with a national action plan for the total eradication of all asbestos by 2032.

2. Kazan-Allen L. (2015, January 14) "Italy's Asbestos Mystery", *International Ban Asbestos Secretariat*. <http://www.ibasecretariat.org/lka-italys-asbestos-mystery.php>

The situation is different in many Western European countries, where a wider range of asbestos-containing products entered the market. The greater product range means that attention has shifted towards other sources of exposure that are more difficult to detect, such as ceiling and floor tiles, flooring glue, window putty, textured paints and a multitude of other applications that can affect workers, especially during maintenance, renovation or private 'Do-It-Yourself' work.

In France, the issue has received more attention than elsewhere. There is now legislation in place that requires mandatory awareness training for all workers in the

construction sector, and requires homeowners to conduct an asbestos assessment before selling their property. Attention has also been placed on roads, another source of environmental exposure, especially in densely populated urban areas where asbestos was used to improve the durability of road surfaces. French labour inspectors who took fibre counts also found that road-sweeping vehicles cause the same level of fibre release as cutting the road surface, and consequently made systems using water to bind and collect asbestos fibres mandatory for these vehicles.

Maintenance, renovation and demolition are some of the most common sources of occupational exposure today. However, construction workers are not the only occupational group at risk. In the United Kingdom, for example, teachers suffer over-proportionately from asbestos-related diseases as many schools are infested with the substance. This is not just a health risk for teachers, but also for pupils who spend a significant portion of their lives in these buildings. Not just in the United Kingdom, public buildings are a general concern throughout Europe, especially when they are used by children – such as schools and sports facilities. However, restraints on public spending often postpone necessary measures to remove remaining asbestos.

In addition, illegal imports that continue to enter the EU further frustrate efforts towards eradicating asbestos in Europe. In 2012, Italian authorities identified an illegal shipment of more than 1 000 tonnes of asbestos from India, which reportedly continued at least through to 2014. While these imports are currently under investigation by Italian prosecutors, suspicion is mounting that asbestos continues to enter the European market in a range of products, including construction material, thermos flasks, baby powder and children's toys.<sup>2</sup>

In order to free Europe safely from asbestos, policy makers must work together with social partners in the construction sector to develop holistic strategies that include a range of policy areas, sharing responsibility at different stages. These include, for example, occupational health and safety, public health, workers' skills and qualifications,



Image: © Martine Zunini

## **Asbestos Campaign**

### **"Europe 2023 – Asbestos Free"**

The issue of secondary exposure has been rather neglected by legislators in the European Union and its Member States, which on average have done too little to protect workers and the general public from this significant health threat that continues to linger in homes and workplaces. This is why the European Federation of Building and Woodworkers (EFBWW), with support of the Nordic Federation of Building and Woodworkers (NBTF) launched its campaign "Europe 2023 – Asbestos Free" in March 2010. Given the broad scope of the issue at hand, the campaign has

focussed on various aspects of the fight against asbestos over the years, building networks with a wide range of stakeholders including policy makers, victim support groups, and labour inspectorates.

The campaign focusses on action in five different areas that include:

1. Registration, notification and medical surveillance;
2. Safer working conditions;
3. Training of workers;
4. The recognition of asbestos related diseases;
5. Recognition procedures and compensation of asbestos-related diseases.

To find out more, log on <http://www.efbww.org>

appropriate level of skills and qualifications. Asbestos awareness training for all workers in the construction industry is a must in this regard. One promising innovation comes from France, where robots are used for asbestos removal. The European Commission can play a key role in promoting research and development in the framework of its Horizon 2020 funding scheme in order to develop innovative practices and techniques for prevention of asbestos-related diseases and for the removal of existing asbestos.

Another accompanying measure is the geographical mapping and registration of asbestos, with a view to gaining greater clarity about what types of buildings and asbestos-containing products prevail in different geographical areas. This would then allow stakeholders to devise tailored strategies and awareness training for the affected workforce. Building owners and companies could then also benefit from reliable information on the patterns of asbestos use and take the appropriate precautionary measures.

Whilst not a substitute for sampling in individual cases, surveying and registering existing asbestos is an important step towards devising an effective EU-wide strategy for asbestos removal by providing an overview of the existing building stock and patterns of asbestos use.

Based on existing experience in Member States, it is important to explore the strengths and weaknesses of different models and promote examples of good practice. The goal is not to implement uniform European standards, but to raise political awareness of the issue in order to facilitate implementation of the appropriate measures at local, regional and national level.

In the end, it is up to policymakers at national level to implement a coherent asbestos strategy that would include the above-mentioned elements. Already in 2011, the World Health Organisation (WHO) called for national action programmes for the elimination of asbestos-related diseases in Europe. Trade unions support this call and believe that the efforts of the European Commission should result in the Member States formulating national action programmes with sufficient funding, including relevant EU funds, to tackle asbestos. ●

market surveillance, research and development, energy efficiency in buildings, waste management and funding.

### **Energy performance in buildings and asbestos removal**

Current policy initiatives at European level prompt an additional sense of urgency to tackling remaining asbestos. In the context of the Energy Union, which is part of the EU's Europe 2020 growth strategy, the energy performance of buildings plays a crucial role in facilitating the energy transition and fighting climate change. In light of the growing need to improve the European building stock in terms of energy performance, it is evident that asbestos will be handled in greater quantities. Considering that the type of renovation work to increase energy performance in buildings typically involves parts of the building where asbestos was used extensively in the past, such as the building's electric plant, roofing, or walls, there is a significant complementarity between the European Commission's policy and the safe removal of remaining asbestos and other hazardous substances. This is particularly the case when conducting works on buildings dating back to the heyday of asbestos use in Europe, which

is reaching an age where it increasingly requires such renovation.

The European Parliament has already proposed to combine energy performance in buildings with asbestos removal in its resolution on "Asbestos-related occupational health threats and prospects for abolishing all existing asbestos" (2012/2065(INI)). The report calls on the European Commission to integrate asbestos removal with other policy areas such as energy efficiency. The European Economic and Social Committee also recently published its opinion on "Freeing the EU from asbestos" (CCMI 130), which recommends similar measures.

To deal with the momentous task at hand, European policymakers – including the European Commission – must go further in designing a holistic strategy to deal with asbestos. Priority could be given to the renovation of public buildings, social housing and to infrastructure projects such as roads, where asbestos has been used extensively. Appropriate financial support should also be available to private home-owners.

Another important area concerns the improvement of working conditions as well as safety and health at work, through innovative technology in asbestos removal, and by ensuring that the relevant workforces are enabled to develop an adequate and