



ASBESTOS

- in Denmark and at the global level

The international health & safety day on 28 April 2005, "Safe and healthy work for all – prevention and responsibility"

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Asbestos in Denmark and at the global level

For hundreds of years now, we have known that Asbestos is a lethal mineral, and this has been documented scientifically many years ago. In Denmark, asbestos has been prohibited since 1986, and demolition work, maintenance work and waste disposal are subject to strict safety rules.

Despite the asbestos ban, there continues to be exposure risks in connection with the demolition, etc, of asbestos waste.

Meanwhile, asbestos-related diseases are taking epidemic-like proportions these years. We are only just beginning to see the carcinogenic effects of the high exposure levels of the 1960s and 1970s. If the warnings regarding the health hazards of asbestos had been taken seriously from the outset, all these tragic deaths and life-threatening diseases which have followed in the wake of asbestos exposure could have been avoided.

Fortunately, it looks as if asbestos has now been effectively removed from the working environment of Danish workers. When looking at the global situation, however, the prospects are not so bright. Asbestos continues to be mined, produced and used in many countries, and many workers are thus continuously exposed to the lethal effects of asbestos.

There are also examples of rich countries and cynical corporations using developing countries as dumping grounds for their asbestos waste. In 2005, once again, we have seen this in connection with companies sending Danish ships to India for breaking up under terrible working conditions – despite their promises not to do so. We need to keep a watchful eye on shady methods like these which international conventions have, unfortunately, not yet had the necessary power to prevent.

The Asbestos Convention of the ILO is a tool which can be used internationally to regulate the risk factors involved in the work with asbestos. 30 countries have ratified this asbestos convention – and Denmark is not one of them.

If Denmark is to take on an international responsibility vis-à-vis the fight against asbestos, a ratification of the asbestos convention is one of the signals that must be sent to the international community.

The Danish Confederation of Trade Unions (LO) estimates that there is nothing that stands in the way of a Danish ratification – The Government and Parliament only need to take the formal steps to bring about ratification.

ICFTU, The International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, has decided to launch a global campaign in 2005 on a prohibition of the use of asbestos and will, amongst others, work for the adoption of a resolution on a global prohibition of the use of asbestos at the ILO Conference of 2006.

Denmark should declare its support for a global prohibition such as this one, and the government should also take this opportunity to announce that it will seek to ensure a Danish ratification of the ILO Asbestos Convention.

A Danish prohibition of the use of asbestos

For many years now, Denmark has had a total ban on any form of import, manufacture, use and processing of asbestos. The use of asbestos for insulation purposes was prohibited in 1972 and the strict prohibition of asbestos in the contents of eternit slabs finally came through in 1986. Despite the asbestos ban, there are still exposure risks in connection with the demolition, etc, of asbestos waste.

Asbestos still kills

Despite the Danish asbestos prohibition, there are many indications that we have, so far, only seen the top of the iceberg as regards the number of pulmonary disease caused by asbestos. This is an underestimated problem – also in Denmark. According to the British Medical Journal, during the next 25 years, 100,000 persons - in the industrialised countries alone - will die as a consequence of pulmonary diseases caused by exposure to asbestos.

Denmark introduced a total prohibition of asbestos 19 years ago now. This has had the preventive effect that asbestos has now almost been completely removed from the working environment. Today, exposure risks are so low that they only risk causing a minimal number of new disease outbreaks in future.

Still, we have not yet seen the full impact of the carcinogenic effects of asbestos. As earlier mentioned, it takes between 10 to 40 years from the initial exposure to asbestos before the exposed person falls ill. Between 1955 and 1980 a large quantity of asbestos was imported into and used in Denmark. The asbestos consumption peaked in the 1970s. During this period, 100-150,000 individuals have been working with asbestos in Denmark.

The number of notifications and recognitions of asbestos-related diseases is therefore currently on the rise and will continue to rise for a number of years to come. It is expected that the number of incidents of pleural cancer will rise from the approximately 100 annual cases at present to around 125 during the next decade. In addition to this, there will be an annual number of approx. 250 Danes with diagnosed pulmonary cancer and an unknown number of Danes will be diagnosed with cancers of the stomach or larynx as a consequence of the exposure to asbestos.

Too few workers are granted industrial injury benefits for injuries caused by occupational exposure to asbestos.

Danish workers are entitled to damages if they suffer from an occupational asbestos-related illness, but many workers lose their right to damages because their industrial injury has not been notified and registered correctly.

According to a survey from the Danish Cancer Register, only 55% of all diagnosed pleural cancers were notified to the National Board of Industrial Injuries between 1994 and 2002. This happened in spite of the fact that we know that 80 – 90% of all incidents of pleural cancer are work-related.

The responsibility for the failure to report incidents of pleural cancer rests with the doctors. Doctors have an obligation to report cases of illnesses to The National Board of Industrial Injuries and The National Working Environment Authority if they have the slightest suspicion that the illness they diagnose may be work-related.

The National Board of Industrial Injuries has promised to follow-up this survey and to make a targeted attempt to inform doctors treating asbestos victims better, so that terminally ill patients do not risk missing out on the compensation that they are entitled to. The Danish trade union movement will be monitoring this development closely.

Exposure to asbestos in 2005 and in the years to come

The use of asbestos peaked in the 1970s and was thus used in more than 3000 different products. Amongst others, asbestos was used in the building and construction industry, the shipbuilding industry, train production, at glassworks, district heating stations, in the asbestos cement industry and in the brake lining industry.

Estates and buildings dating earlier than 1972 which have not yet been renovated are therefore certain to contain asbestos in basement pipes and boilers. Eternit slates on roofs, in flower cribs and in wallboards manufactured before 1986 also contain asbestos.

During the late 80s, attempts were made to contain the problems with asbestos instead of eliminating them once and for all. A number of good stopgap measures have been carried out in the form of surface treatments or by covering old asbestos ceiling sheets with new asbestos-free ceiling sheets. The asbestos has been encapsulated and we have thus “ensured” that our grand children now also risk exposure to asbestos when renovating and demolishing buildings and constructions erected prior to 1972. This problem has been enhanced by the fact that there has only been a limited registration of the buildings that contain the encapsulated asbestos.

In spite of the Danish prohibition of asbestos, there are still large amounts of asbestos in Denmark, and many workers continue to be exposed to this lethal substance. This is particularly the case in the building and construction industry.

Where is asbestos found today?					
Occupational group Product	Previously-installed asbestos cement	Previously-installed insulating material	Bonded gaskets	Non-bonded gaskets	Other outdated /previously installed products
Insulation work		Pipes and boilers Inflatable valves/ heat exchangers/ pipe bends. Smoke ducts Boilers. Ovens.			Asbestos cushions on turbines and engines
Heating, water and sanitation	Earth-conductors Breather/Ventilation pipes in asbestos cement Heating flutes for district heating. Slated roofs	Pipes, containers and boilers in furnaces and heat exchangers in heating plants Ventilation pipes	Pipe gaskets high-pressure gaskets pumps Valves Chemical processing plants	Boilers/hot-water boilers. Oil burners Top covers. Wet filters. Explosion valves.	Gas radiators (gaskets, ventilation pipes, backboards)
Electricians	Fireproof cable ducts Cable ducts in asbestos-cement sheets Ceiling sheets				Fire resistant cables with orange plastic covering. Insulation of electric cabinets Asbestos millboard in older electric- heating devices
Joiners and carpenters/ floor fitters	Asbestos cement sheets for roofs and frontages Ceiling and wall-sheathing. Air shafts. Flower cribs Window sills				Stripping of asbestos floors (magnetite) Filling material Vinyl floor covering
Digging and concrete work	Asbestos cement sheets for roofs, frontages, walls and ceilings Tar paper sheathing Rubbish chutes. Ventilation ducts and heating flutes.	furnace- and boiler rooms			Filling material Asbestos flooring
Painters	Removal and high-pressure cleaning of asbestos cement. fillings of walls and ceilings containing asbestos.				Putty Joint sealer and filling material
Masons	Weatherboards Covered masonry				Tile adhesive Asbestos flooring (magnetite)
Demolition work	All areas under other occupational groups mentioned in this table				

Source: Asbestos guideline, The Working Environment Council of the Building & Construction Industry

Danish rules on the management previously-installed asbestos

In spite of the Danish prohibition of asbestos, many workers continue to be exposed to asbestos at work, primarily in connection with demolition, renovation and maintenance. Today, we know the serious consequences of exposure to asbestos. Therefore, all forms of work involving asbestos are subject to restrictive safety rules that must be observed. These rules have last been tightened in 2004 due to increased restrictions incorporated into the EU's asbestos directives.

In 2006, The EU's Senior Labour Inspectors' Committee (SLIC) will give special focus to the management of previously-installed asbestos - for instance in connection with demolition work.

The Danish rules on asbestos contain very specific criteria for the organisation and cleaning of the workplace, as well as personal protective equipment, maximum working hours, fencing of workplaces and warning signs. The Executive Order in question contains rules on demolition, repair and maintenance work. Furthermore, it contains rules on notification, training and measuring of asbestos contents as well as specific rules on the handling of asbestos waste. Furthermore, according to these regulations, workers exposed to asbestos shall have access to health examinations and must be registered, etc.

Awareness of asbestos is diminishing in Denmark

In spite of the knowledge we have on the consequences of exposure to asbestos today, and the restrictive rules that have been introduced on the management of previously-installed asbestos, there are still many examples of ill-planned demolition and renovation work which fails to live up to the asbestos regulations.

The rules on the handling of asbestos must always be observed if there is only the slightest indication that a worker may be exposed to asbestos in connection with his/her work. Meanwhile, the problem is that awareness of asbestos risks has dropped to a very low level. Many artisans and field engineers – particularly the younger construction workers – are unwittingly exposed to materials containing asbestos without enjoying the protection of the intensified awareness which was seen in the 1980s.

The problems with asbestos are far from solved at the global level

Globally, two million workers die every year due to poor health and safety conditions. From these two million, approximately 1,6m die as a consequence of work-related illnesses. Asbestos alone is one of the most important – if not the single most important – risk factors.

At the world level, asbestos is still produced and consumed to a considerable extent. The estimated annual world production of asbestos is 2m tonnes. The global production is thus presently at the same level as in 1960. There are seven major manufacturers that each produces 50,000 tonnes a year. Russia and Canada held together produce 78 % of the total global asbestos production. The consumption of asbestos is almost equivalent to its production but the consumers are difficult to identify. Meanwhile, Russia is the single largest manufacturer and purchaser of asbestos in the world. In addition to this, it is important to underline, that 20% of consumption takes place in developing countries and 62 % takes place in Eastern and Central Europe.

In recent years, the developing countries' share of asbestos consumption has risen concurrently with the reduction or stop of consumption in industrialised countries. Some industrialised countries produce vast amounts of asbestos without consuming any of it themselves. However, they market and export it for developing countries. This is a serious ethical and legislative issue in global trade.

The Danish "export" of asbestos problems by sending ships for breaking up in developing countries raise similar ethical issues. In 2005, we have seen other examples of this, as Danish ferries – despite all promises – have been sent to India for breaking up under terrible working conditions. A watchful eye needs to be kept on such shady practices.

During the past decades, asbestos has caused serious health problems in the industrialised world, and it will cause even greater problems in developing countries as well as in growing economies, such as China and India – where the capacity to produce and consume asbestos is high concurrently with a disproportionately low level of risk knowledge and capacity for prevention and control. If world consumption remains at its current level and spreads to developing countries, the asbestos epidemic that have seen in the industrialised countries will continue long into the next century, but in other parts of the world.

Denmark has a global responsibility

Today, Denmark has a working environment which is virtually asbestos-free. But this does not mean that the task is completed. We have a duty to act to ensure that the global working environment also becomes asbestos free - or at least to work to ensure, that workers world wide enjoy equivalent minimum rights at their workplaces.

Today, we have an international tool to regulate the risk factors involved in the work with asbestos, namely the Asbestos Convention of the ILO, "Safety in the use of asbestos (no. 162) which was adopted in 1986. If a country chooses to ratify this Convention, it is legally binding and must be implemented through national legislation. The Convention is constituted of a set of guidelines on how to handle asbestos in a way which observes health & safety standards but, unfortunately, it contains no prohibition against the use of asbestos. This is due to the fact that any such initiatives are opposed by certain countries that continue to let the economic advantages in connection with asbestos precede preventive perspectives.

So far, only 30 countries have ratified the asbestos convention. This means that approximately 85 % of the world population is still not covered by a ratified convention on asbestos. What is even worse is that more workers are left with absolutely no form of efficient protection. There is an urgent need to ensure universal minimum rights on this issue for workers at a global level.

Denmark is among the countries that have not yet ratified the ILO Asbestos Convention.

The asbestos campaigns of the international trade union movement in 2005 and 2006

For a number of years now, the international trade union movement has attempted to introduce a requirement for the prohibition of asbestos. The ICFTU Congress of 2004 decided to make efforts to obtain such a worldwide prohibition. In certain countries,

requirements will also be set up to provide compensations for workers when mines and production sites are closed down.

The international trade union movement (ICFTU) has subsequently decided to carry out a global campaign on a possible asbestos prohibition. An attempt will be made to adopt a resolution on a global prohibition of asbestos at the International Labour Conference of the ILO in 2006. Furthermore, attempts will be made to promote the ILO asbestos Convention. The campaign will be launched in connection with the International Labour Conference of the ILO in June 2005.

LO will seek to obtain Danish support for this campaign as well as support for a global prohibition. We would like to see the Danish government announce an approaching ratification of the ILO Asbestos Convention.

Danish failure to ratify the ILO Asbestos Convention

LO would welcome a Danish ratification of the ILO Asbestos Convention. As can be seen from the quote below, LO assesses that neither the provisions of the Convention nor the Danish regulation pose any real obstacle to ratification. However, ratification simply requires the government and the Danish Parliament to take the necessary formal steps.

An official explanation to the Danish failure to ratify the ILO Asbestos Convention follows in the below memorandum from the Ministry of Employment to the Structural Committee of The Working Environment Council in April 2002.

“Contents: The convention has been ratified by 26 countries and is about health & safety measures in connection with the use of asbestos. The convention establishes that national legislation must be prepared in this area containing provisions and procedures regarding the protective and preventive measures to be taken in connection with the use of asbestos. Furthermore, a monitoring system of the labour market must be set up with a view to controlling the use of asbestos and for efficient enforcement of the safety regulations.

Reason for non-ratification: In accordance with the text of the convention, appropriate health & safety measures must be established in connection with demolition work. This must be done by means of authorisations from demolition companies (cf. article 17). In Denmark, we do not apply such a system of authorisation. However, there is a requirement for specific training”

LO agrees with the fact that we do not have an authorisation scheme for demolition companies. However, we assess that the lack of an authorisation scheme does not in itself stand in the way of a Danish ratification. In our view, the Danish asbestos provisions fully ensure a level of protection which corresponds to the level of protection prescribed by the ILO regulations.

Amongst other things, we have a good training programme for asbestos workers which has been approved by the National Working Environment Authority.

Furthermore, it is a fact that a number of EU-countries have ratified the Asbestos Convention in spite of the fact that they do not have an authorisation scheme. This is the case in Sweden and Germany, for example. These countries have regulations on this area and in other areas which are comparable to Danish regulations.

In Denmark, the demolition of materials containing asbestos indoors in buildings, ships, trains and machines must be reported to the local working environment authority prior to the commencement of the demolition work. Such notification is also compulsory for other types of work with asbestos unless this only involves short-term or low levels of exposure to asbestos. As is the case in Sweden and in Germany, certain forms of less hazardous asbestos work are thus exempt from the requirement to notify the authorities.