



THE IMPORTANCE OF APPROPRIATE ASBESTOS TRAINING AND AWARENESS

The recent slew of newspaper articles detailing asbestos related deaths and poor asbestos removal has brought to light, once again, the need for adequate information, training and diligence when working near asbestos installations.

Take, for instance, the Observer article regarding the 28 year old woman who died from asbestos related cancer. The young lady developed mesothelioma, a cancer deemed exclusively asbestos related, in her late 20's. She died after battling with the disease for many months. Due to the long incubation period of the disease, approximately 20 years, it has typically been thought to be an older person's disease. However, with this newest victim it has prompted an investigation as to whether the lady was exposed to asbestos fibres as a child in school. It may never be proven where she came in contact with asbestos but it has certainly caused concern over maintenance and repair work where asbestos is present, particularly in public buildings.

Many of our nation's schools and public buildings contain asbestos products which were used for their excellent fire retardant and insulation properties. These asbestos products, over time, can become damaged through wear and tear or through negligence on the part of a sub-contractor working in the area. The latter of the two reasons has caused many accidental disturbances where fibres have been released and an expensive clean up project has been required. The former, has resulted due to poor monitoring and remedial actions.

An asbestos product only poses a risk to people if it is damaged and fibres are released into the air. It is these fibres that can be inhaled or ingested where they can embed themselves into soft tissue. Overtime, scar tissue forms around the fibre and the cells within the tissue can become cancerous. The time from exposure to a cancer related disease making itself known can range from 10 to 30 years. With such a long period of time it is often impossible to determine where the initial exposure occurred or how it happened.

The Control of Asbestos Regulations 2006 puts in place regulations and guidance to prevent accidental exposures and poor asbestos installation management. It puts specific responsibilities on the dutyholder, otherwise known as the responsible person, to ensure that they provide a safe place of work and habitation.

Local authorities and housing associations should pay particular attention to the actions of contractors working under their remit. Ultimate responsibility lies with the owner not always who carried out the work. The duty holder should always ensure the people they employ are competent, have had, at a minimum, an asbestos awareness course and are given the relevant asbestos survey prior to carrying out the work.

A detailed management plan that outlines the duty holder is required. This should include the way in which contractors are allowed to work on site, how they are vetted, frequency for monitoring the condition of the installations and an emergency action plan, amongst other things.

For more information on your responsibilities or awareness training please contact the asbestos department of Leyden Kirby Associates.

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