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HEALTH DIMENSION OF ASBESTOS IN MAURITIUS

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Following the death of a worker from lung cancer in May 2001, workers representatives suspected the cause to be linked to asbestos and lodged a complaint with the Ministry of Labour. The worker was from a group of 7 workers involved in laying and repairing asbestos cement pipes used for irrigation of sugar cane fields. The work consisted of sawing and adjusting the pipes and this caused the generation of large amount of dust. The workers were not provided with personal protective equipment and were not aware of the dangers.

An autopsy carried out on the dead worker confirmed the lung cancer and also established the presence of asbestos fibers in the lungs. However since the worker was a heavy smoker for many years, death could not be attributed directly to asbestos. Samples of the cement pipe sent for analysis confirmed the presence of chrysotile asbestos fibers in the cement pipe.

Officers of the Ministry of Labour and Health investigated the complaint and after assessing the health and environmental risks of exposure to dusts containing asbestos immediately directed worked to be stopped . All the workers were examined by an Occupational Health Physician, X-Ray showed that 2 workers had pleural thickenings and CT scans confirmed the presence of plural plaques. These workers were prevented from further work with asbestos cement pipes. The remaining workers were given training and education on preventive measures. They were finally allowed to complete the work after provision of appropriate personal protective equipment. Wet grinding was recommended. The area was kept out of bound for the public. All the dusts and contaminated earth and washings were removed and buried in a secluded place. The place was marked and no development is allowed on that land.

Subsequently union leaders voiced concern for the health of inhabitants of EDC Housing Estates where houses constructed for cyclone victims were made with asbestos cement panels. In August 2001, Government set up an Inter-Ministerial meeting with representatives of workers , representatives of employers, and other Ministries and Departments concerned. Government then decided to contact the Commonwealth Secretariat for the services of an expert in asbestos.

Mr John Addison, Expert from the Commonwealth Secretariat for Technical Cooperation came to Mauritius in November 2001 to assess the health risks posed by the presence of asbestos in housing estates, public buildings and at the workplace. Mr Addison made recommendations on protection of workers, on legislation to control the use of asbestos to protect the public, workers and the environment. He carried out training for officers of

the Ministry of Labour , Health and Environment. He also advised on the setting up of a dedicated laboratory. During his visit he took samples of suspected asbestos materials and confirmed the presence of different types of asbestos fibers in different places ie. Factories, public utilities, housing estates and public buildings. He also showed concern about the way asbestos materials were being removed from sugar factories. Following the report of the expert, Government set up a Technical Committee in May 2002, under the Ministry of Health to prepare an Action Plan to implement the recommendations of Mr Addison.

An action plan was prepared in October 2002 and each stakeholder came up with immediate, short term and long term actions to be taken concerning management of asbestos materials falling under their responsibilities . The technical committee under the Ministry of Health has been meeting regularly to monitor progress made by each stakeholder in the implementation of the Action Plan.

The following actions have been taken so far:

1. The import and use of all types of asbestos fibers have been prohibited under the Dangerous Chemicals Control Act 2004.
2. Products containing asbestos is controlled, Products containing blue asbestos have been banned.
3. The following Regulations have been made: 'Control of Asbestos at Work Regulations'; 'Prohibition of Asbestos at Work Regulations' and 'Asbestos Licensing Regulations'.
4. Training programs for workers, employers and union representatives, Health & Safety Officers have been carried out.
5. Medical Surveillance for workers handling asbestos products and materials have been started.
6. A Protocol on Measures to protect workers at work with asbestos has been prepared
7. Disposal of asbestos wastes is being regulated.
8. Inhabitants of housing estates have been screened for health problems related to asbestos exposure. Sensitization campaigns have been carried out for workers
9. Surveys have been carried out in Health and Educational Institutions and actions have already been taken to replace asbestos materials according to plans.
10. A survey of public buildings has been launched to identify asbestos materials, assess risks to users and propose remedial measures.
11. The Central Electricity Board has completed replacements of asbestos materials in their boilers. Old engines and boilers have been scrapped and asbestos removed under supervision
12. The Central Water Authority has stopped using asbestos cement pipes for potable water.
13. A project has been launched to dispose of a large amount of old asbestos cement pipes either in a dedicated landfill or at high seas.
14. Contacts have been established with overseas laboratories for help to set up a laboratory in Mauritius

Problems

There are still many private buildings with asbestos materials. The asbestos panels in the Housing Estates will have to be replaced by Government. This will be a very costly project, but the health of the inhabitants should be a major concern for the Government. Identification of disposal site is another problem. The present cell for hazardous waste in the landfill site is reaching saturation point and the authorities will have to look for alternative sites.

Training of personnel is very important to carry out the policies of Government concerning protection of health of workers, the public and the environment.

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