

Dresden Declaration on the Protection of Workers against Asbestos

In 2000 an Asbestos Session initiated by the Senior Labour Inspectors' Committee (SLIC) on the hazards caused by handling of asbestos at work, was held in Sweden, Spain, the UK and France. The report of this Session initiated the Asbestos Conference 2003 in Dresden. Also in 2003 the revised European Union (EU) Asbestos Directive was adopted. In this context, the European Asbestos Conference in Dresden makes the following declaration.

Over 160 participants from all EU states and all accession states, and from outside Europe, (Brazil, Thailand and Japan) and from the European Commission and ILO attended the Conference. Participants came from the national authorities, including the national inspectorates, from the social partners, from academic and scientific institutions, and from accident-insurance organisations. The Conference calls attention to the fact that asbestos remains the primary carcinogenic toxin in the workplace in most countries. The illnesses caused by asbestos fibres are amongst the most serious and costly occupational diseases. In Europe and worldwide millions of workers and consumers are exposed to asbestos. In the industrialised countries of Western Europe, North America, Japan and Australia, 20,000 asbestos-induced lung cancers and 10,000 mesothelioma cases are estimated to occur each year*. In transition and developing countries the risk is now even higher than in the established market economies and it is certain that in the transition and developing countries in 20 to 30 years' time asbestos will prove to be a health "time bomb".

Twenty seven countries in Europe and other regions have already seen the need to ban the production, handling and use of asbestos for protection of the health of workers and the public. In those countries asbestos consumption has dropped to negligible levels. Nevertheless, two million tons of asbestos are still produced each year, with consumption on the increase in developing countries all around the world.

The Conference is convinced that protection against asbestos will remain a key challenge in Europe's work on occupational health and safety, particularly in relation to the renovation, maintenance or repair of buildings, plant and equipment which contain asbestos. The adoption of the revised Asbestos Directive enhances the EU's prevention strategy.

To implement the EU strategy on occupational safety and health 2002-2006, which is designed to decrease the numbers of accidents at work, enhance occupational disease prevention, improve risk awareness through education, improve the use of applicable

* "Consensus Report; Asbestos, Asbestosis and Cancer: The Helsinki criteria for diagnosis and attribution; Scand J Work Environ Health 23 (1997) 311 - 316

legislation and promote innovative approaches, the Conference calls upon the European Commission and the Senior Labour Inspectors Committee (SLIC) to take action to:

- produce guidelines which:
 - ensure consistent implementation of the legislation and comprehensive monitoring by the competent authorities, including prevention of imports of materials containing asbestos from non-EU countries;
 - help identify asbestos and asbestos products during use, maintenance and servicing of plant, equipment and buildings and raise awareness of their presence;
 - describe good practice on how to remove asbestos (inter alia by dust suppression, enclosure and protective equipment) and how to handle asbestos-cement products and wastes;
 - encourage an approach to protective equipment and clothing which takes into account human factors and individual variability;
- help share experience and bring greater consistency to medical surveillance (taking into consideration the existing approaches in member states); and in particular to promote continuing medical surveillance after exposure stops and the establishment of national registers. In the context of the improvement of the European List of Occupational Diseases, guidance should be given on the recognition of asbestos diseases;
- disseminate the existing guidelines prepared by Commission Working Groups on the training of asbestos operatives and of labour inspectors, and implement their recommendations by 2006;
- review the economics of asbestos removal, and discourage the payment of “danger money”, which undermines effective prevention;
- initiate, with the social partners, a European campaign in 2006 to support the implementation of the Directive.
- stop the export of waste contaminated with asbestos to third countries.

The Conference calls upon the member and accession states and their social partners to:

- make protection of employees against asbestos exposure at the workplace a priority;
- increase the co-ordination of national labour inspectorates' activities and those of other national departments or authorities, in relation to asbestos protection;
- ensure effective monitoring of and advice for companies involved with asbestos;
- pay special attention to the training of labour inspectors both in relation to the protection of workers and to the health of the inspectors themselves;
- ensure that workers dealing with asbestos are competent and appropriately trained;
- ensure the necessary infrastructure, services and competence of physicians in relation to asbestos hazards and associated health surveillance, diagnosis and where appropriate, treatment of occupational disease;
- undertake and support all measures intended to eliminate asbestos and asbestos products from the economic cycle and to replace asbestos with less harmful products.

The Conference calls upon the ILO to:

- continue to encourage Member States to ratify and implement ILO Convention No 162, Safety in the use of asbestos, as a minimum standard not to be fallen below;
- assist Member States by drawing up national action programmes for the management, control and ultimate elimination of asbestos from the working and social environments;
- establish in collaboration with the European Commission an international data bank of asbestos-containing products, of substitutes for asbestos, and of good practices for management and elimination of asbestos;
- co-operate with other international organisations, (eg WHO and the World Bank) and NGOs, (eg IALI and ICOH), to provide guidance and support for a well-governed process to eliminate the use of asbestos.

Eradicating asbestos-related health risks means disseminating the experiences of Europe and adapting these to the needs of other states. The European Conference on Asbestos 2003 expresses its conviction that the ultimate goal is a worldwide ban on asbestos production and use.