

ALG Memo 6/03
Asbestos Licensing Unit

To: Members of the Asbestos Liaison Group

From: James Skilling
Head of ALU

Date: 5 December 2003

Subject: **Health and Safety Laboratory Report: Asbestos workers and their perception of risk - Summary**

1 The attached document was first issued under cover of an ALG memo in June 2001. The memo has come up for automatic review. As the content of the summary is still very relevant, the memo has been re-issued and will appear shortly on the internet. The previous version(ALG 6/01) should now be destroyed.

JIM SKILLING
Head of Asbestos Licensing Unit

Health and Safety Laboratory Report: Asbestos Workers and their Perceptions of Risk

Summary

Work Place Risk Management Unit (WRMU) of HDC will be reviewing all guidance for asbestos removal workers in 2002. They decided that useful background to this would be some research on how the workers perceive the risks of working with asbestos and how they receive the guidance. It was recognised that such research was also likely to lead to other general findings of interest.

WRMU approached Work Psychology Section (WPS) for their assistance in carrying out this research. WPS used semi-structured interviews with 36 licensed asbestos removal workers and supervisors to meet WRMU's objectives, and the results are discussed in this report

This results will be used in conjunction with those from other reports commissioned by WRMU and enable them to tailor the forthcoming HSE guidance accordingly.

Objectives

The main objective of this study was to determine how the risks posed by working with asbestos are perceived by people who work with asbestos. This was achieved by addressing the following issues:

- Are front line asbestos workers aware of the risks involved when working with asbestos?
- What precautions do asbestos workers take?
- Do the asbestos workers think they are being protected?

Guidance Related Findings

- 1 Although asbestos removal workers had seen HSE guidance, and recognise it, very few had actually read it.
- 2 The more experienced workers were unlikely to pay attention to guidance since they believed it did not contain anything they did not already know.
- 3 No one particular asbestos job is the same, and thus guidance was often regarded as not practical and not applicable to many jobs.
- 4 Workers believed there should be different levels of guidance which account for the different levels of experience among themselves (ie. trainees, experienced workers, and supervisors).
- 5 A minority of the interviewees only dealt with asbestos on a very small scale. They found that the guidance which they were provided with was not relevant since it was aimed at workers who worked with asbestos on a large scale.

Guidance Related Recommendations

- 1 Account for the variability in jobs when producing guidance for asbestos removal workers so that they are not so generalised.
- 2 Change the language used in the guidance so it is easier to read for asbestos workers.
- 3 Change the layout of the guidance with the use of more pictures and diagrams.
- 4 Change the colours of the different guidance documents so they are more easily distinguishable.
- 5 Merge the guidance into one compact book which contains the main procedures in bullet point format.

Non-guidance Related Findings

- 1 Although not directly asked about masks, workers voiced their concern about this issue and the fact that they believe masks do not offer 100% protection against asbestos fibres.
- 2 Concern was shown about the inability to identify asbestos, and how to deal with it by other trades who come across asbestos such as plumbers and electricians.
- 3 As with guidance, the more experienced interviewees were unlikely to pay attention to training since they believed it did not contain anything they did not already know.
- 4 The interviewees who only dealt with asbestos on a small scale said that the training which they were provided with was not relevant. This was again because they believed it was aimed at workers who work with asbestos on a large scale.
- 5 Although the workers were aware of the hazards of dry stripping, power tools and brushes when working with asbestos, some admitted to using it occasionally due to factors such as the nature of the job and time and money pressures.
- 6 It was found that most of the workers had not had any contact with HSE Inspectors. Almost all of these workers believed it would be beneficial to see Inspectors either at training sessions or within enclosures.

Non-guidance Related Recommendations

- 1 Account for the variability in jobs when devising training sessions for asbestos removal workers so that they are not so generalised.
- 2 Provide training in identifying asbestos to other industries who may come across it such as electricians and plumbers. This will inform them of the different types of asbestos, how to recognise it, and the procedures for its removal.
- 3 Provide specific training for those who undertake asbestos removal primarily on a small scale.
- 4 Provide basic advice in asbestos to those who work in buildings which are likely to contain asbestos such as hospitals, schools and offices. This could provide education

on basic issues such as where it is commonly found, what its effects are, and what to do if asbestos is found in the building.

- 5 Make clients who employ asbestos firms more aware of asbestos and the procedures for its removal. Thus, they may be less likely to impose tight monetary and time constraints on the asbestos removal firms. This could be achieved by the previous recommendation.

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