

Meeting date: 22 February 2007

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Type of paper: For discussion

Paper File Ref:

Exemptions:

WATCH COMMITTEE

The risk of ill-health from low-level exposures to asbestos – exploring what can (and can't) be reliably discerned about the dose-response relationships involved in “low level exposure”

Initial discussion about scope of project and best means of its progression

Issue

1. In the “new and emerging issues” session at the November 2006 WATCH meeting, a high priority issue was deemed to be the submission titled “risks from low-level exposure to asbestos”. The issue for this paper is the appropriate course of action from hereon.

Timing

2. No particular timing issues.

Recommendation

3. WATCH is invited to consider this paper and to develop its thinking on an appropriate future course of action

Background

4. In its “new and emerging issues” session at the November 2006 meeting, WATCH (expanded with additional Community of Practice and Interest [COPI] members) identified as a high priority issue the submission titled “risks from low-level exposure to asbestos”.

5. There is an awareness that specific regulatory issues on asbestos arise on a regular basis, for HSE and other authorities, that relate back to a general question. That is, what does the available science indicate can be said, with confidence, about the dose-response curves, at relatively low levels of exposure, for the various forms of asbestos and the diseases that they can produce?

6. The issue now is how best to advance this work.

Argument

7. For the February 2007 meeting of WATCH this item is very much one of scoping. WATCH is invited to discuss: what are the crucial questions that this piece of work should attempt to address; how should the work be progressed (ie what are the key sources of information; which of a number of potential

options should be followed for expert committee/group scrutiny; and what might be a sensible and feasible timescale for the work?

8. To help with such considerations, Annex 1 is the “Hodgson and Darnton” (H&D) paper that was previously supplied as an Annex within the WATCH paper on the removal of textured decorative coatings (WATCH/2006/1, Annex 3), considered by WATCH at its meeting in February 2006. The dose-response relationship model described by this paper has been central to HSE statements in recent years on the risks of cancer posed by exposure to different forms of asbestos. However this issue is progressed, consideration of the H&D paper and the utilisation of the “H&D” model will be a crucial aspect.

Link to HSC Strategy

9. This work relates directly to HSC/E’s statutory responsibilities in relation to asbestos; it also has potential relevance for the asbestos strand of the Cancer Project within HSE’s Disease Reduction Programme.

Consultation

10. There has been no external consultation on this paper.

European Context

11. There is no direct European context although much of the regulatory framework for asbestos is EU-wide. It is possible that the output of this work might have some EU applicability.

Action

12. WATCH is invited to consider and offer its thoughts about the issues raised in paragraphs 5-7.

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References / Attachments

Annex 1 Hodgson and Darnton (2000) The quantitative risks of mesothelioma and lung cancer in relation to asbestos exposure. *Annals of Occupational Hygiene*, 44.