

Dealing with asbestos realistically demands alternatives to removal

The NSW Ombudsman's appeal for a national asbestos removal program may be unrealistic in the short term but the issue must, and can be, addressed affordably experts argue.

"Asbestos is often wrongly thrown into the 'too hard' basket," says Peter O'Connell, managing director of Metro Asbestos Roof Restoration.

The firm, which assesses hundreds of buildings for asbestos each year, agrees with the ombudsman's findings that action to deal with the health threats posed to Australians has largely stalled.

"Information, assessments and quotations for remedial asbestos work on private, corporate and government buildings gather dust for years because agencies aren't properly resourced to enforce compliance," says Mr O'Connell, who contends the problem is so big that wholesale removal is not feasible in the short term and alternatives must be considered.

Industrial chemist and former James Hardie researcher, Vidas Ridikas, recently reviewed 465 asbestos audits of buildings in the Sydney metropolitan area. He found that of 90 roofs clad with corrugated asbestos cement sheets, 86 were in an advanced state of natural weathering. The remaining four roofs proved to be in a stable condition because they had been encapsulated.

"Natural weathering processes such as the action of rain, hail, wind and biological attack by lichens has resulted in the dissolution and erosion of the cement based matrix, and the exposure of unbonded asbestos fibres on the upper surface of the corrugated roof sheets," reports Mr Ridikas.

"In addition to the loose fibres on the surface of the sheets, fibres washed from the roof in rainy weather were observed to accumulate in bundles on the edge of the sheets in the valleys of the corrugates. These bundles consisted virtually of pure asbestos fibre.

"Gutters were also contaminated with asbestos fibre. Overflowing gutters or damaged and disconnected down pipes spill rain water onto the ground and may contaminate the soil with asbestos fibre. These roofs are an asbestos hazard and the amount of asbestos roofing in the community is immense."

Mr O'Connell believes the scale of the asbestos problem may be the root cause of inaction. Metro Asbestos Roof Restoration regularly presents its services to the 10,000 or so visitors to Melbourne's annual Safety In Action trade show and finds many are overwhelmed.

"It's often a great relief to Safety In Action visitors to learn that they can generally stabilise asbestos with coatings," he says. "They find it hard to fund the cost of the asbestos removal, a replacement roof and the massive disruption the process causes."

"We see a major role for the encapsulation of asbestos roofs to provide viable and economical protection until roof removal and replacement can take place."

Ultimately, Mr O'Connell agrees, all asbestos roofs will have to be replaced. The first step, he says, is to quantify just how much of Australia's roofing is affected.

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"No single agency knows the extent of the problem. A simple extension of the Asbestos Register scheme would provide this vital information."

"In New South Wales, WorkCover requires all commercial and industrial premises to compile and maintain a register of the asbestos in the workplace, but there's no requirement to register this information with WorkCover NSW. By compiling these registers, a database of the extent and type of asbestos in the community could be utilised for future use in the abatement of asbestos."

"The implementation of maintaining central records of asbestos registers would go a long way to prevent more exposure to asbestos."

Metro Asbestos Roof Restoration will offer advice and asbestos management services at Safety In Action from April 5 to 7, 2011, at the Melbourne Exhibition Centre. For more information, visit www.safetyinaction.net.au, email safetyvisitor@aec.net.au or phone Australian Exhibitions & Conferences Pty Ltd on 03 9654 7773.

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Media release prepared by Marian Macdonald, Firefly Marketing. Phone: (03) 5185 1357, mobile: (0421) 530 944 or email: marianm@fireflymarketing.com.au

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Organised by: Australian Exhibitions & Conferences Pty Ltd
Level 2, 267 Collins Street, Melbourne, VIC, 3000, Tel 03 9654 7773 Fax 03 9654 5596
Email safety@aec.net.au Web safetyinaction.net.au or melbmaterialshandling.com.au