

Tuesday, 4 September 2012

New agency is an important commitment to making Australia asbestos-free by 2030: unions

The establishment of a new national agency to oversee the management and removal of asbestos is an important step towards eradicating all asbestos from Australia by 2030, say unions.

ACTU Assistant Secretary Michael Borowick said asbestos remained a silent killer and the Government's announcement at the joint ACTU-Cancer Council Australia summit in Sydney, showed it took the issue seriously.

He said the new Office for Asbestos Safety must quickly move to implement a plan to make Australia asbestos-free within two decades.

"About 600 Australians are dying from asbestos-related diseases each year, including increasing numbers who inadvertently breathed in asbestos fibres during home renovation projects," Mr Borowick said.

"Although asbestos was banned almost a decade ago, Australians are concerned that it remains a major health hazard in the community, and unions are determined that the removal of asbestos by 2030 remains on the public agenda.

"Today's announcement by the Minister for Workplace Relations, Bill Shorten, that the Government will establish a new agency is a good step towards our goal," Mr Borowick said.

"Unions called for a new government agency as part of our submission to the response to the recent Asbestos Management Review by Geoff Fary, so we are pleased the review panel supported our recommendation and that the Government has also listened."

Mr Borowick said a strategic plan by the new Office for Asbestos Safety would pave the way towards the ultimate goal of complete asbestos removal, and would help deal with its existence now, while ensuring all Australians were made aware of its dangers.

"People have a right to be protected, both at home and at work, so awareness of its prevalence is a crucial first step," he said. "Until we know exactly which homes and buildings it is in, Australians are effectively rolling the dice on their own lives."

Mr Borowick said today's Asbestos Summit in Sydney was an important opportunity for experts, governments and advocates to work towards solutions to ending the 600 deaths that continue each year from the asbestos disease, mesothelioma.

"Australia has the highest rate of mesothelioma deaths in the world and experts predict this will worsen in the future, with the rise of home renovations," he said.

"Unions have long been calling for the safe removal of asbestos by 2030, starting with Government buildings, and for an audit of its existence in residential properties built before production ended in 1987. The trail of asbestos leaves a grim legacy and today's Summit is an important discussion about how to end it."

Media contact:

Rebecca Tucker: ph (03) 9664 7359 or 0408 031 269; email rtucker@actu.org.au