

New rules to make asbestos disposal safer

Effective from May 1, the measures will benefit both workers and public

By KASH CHEONG

THE removal of asbestos could be safer for workers and the public after the Workplace Safety and Health (WSH) Council and Ministry of Manpower (MOM) spelt out enhanced regulations yesterday for work involving the building material, now known to cause serious illness.

The new rules specify that companies must have a proper workplan to deal with asbestos, including a risk assessment, if it is present. They must also notify MOM seven days before starting work that involves asbestos.

All buildings constructed before 1991 must now be assessed for asbestos-containing materials before they are renovated or demolished, and the assessor has to pass a course administered by the Workforce Development Agency.

Asbestos is commonly found in ships and old buildings, as it was a popular heat-insulating material in the 60s and 70s. The import of raw asbestos was banned in 1988, when it was discovered to be hazardous. Brake pads and clutch linings with asbestos were also banned in 1995.

In a recent check, MOM found 11 out of 36 worksites contained asbestos. It issued five stop-work orders and 20 fines.

Structures built before 1991 may have asbestos-containing materials in corrugated roofs, ceiling boards, floor tiles and partition walls, Senior Minister of State for Health and Manpower Amy Khor said at the Asbestos Forum yesterday, making them the target of the new rules.

If asbestos is found to be present in a building, it can be removed only by approved contractors and workers.

"This will ensure that work activities are carried out under proper management and protection," said Dr Khor. "It will also prevent the release of asbestos fibres into the air, which can affect the public."

The new regulations, listed in a detailed 65-page handbook, also specify the technical requirements for the removal and disposal of asbestos-containing materials. Among them, workers must wear protective suits and disinfect their gear. They need to double-bag the asbestos and associated materials, which must be disposed of by a contractor approved by the National Environment Agency.

MOM will enforce the new rules by conducting checks. Penalties for flouting them include fines of up to \$20,000 and 24 months in jail.

The WSH (Asbestos) Regulations replace the old Factories (Asbestos) Regulations, which were vaguely worded.

"The new regulations are industry standard for firms that remove asbestos ethically, but spelling them out means that MOM is taking asbestos removal seriously," said Mr Lai Kok Wing, principal consultant of Pureenviro, a company carrying out asbestos removal. "This would weed out unethical individuals who do a slipshod job and leave workers or the public exposed to asbestos."

Asbestos can cause respiratory diseases like malignant mesothelioma, lung cancer or asbestosis, a chronic fibrotic disease of the lung for which there is no cure. In Singapore, there have been 39 confirmed cases of work-related asbestosis and 63 cases of mesothelioma since 1970. Illness can arise from exposure to asbestos as far back as 20 to 40 years ago.

Given that such diseases can surface after years, the WSH Council and MOM will also extend help to workers who have contracted asbestos-related diseases but are no longer eligible to claim work injury compensation.

To help the industry adapt to the new rules, guidelines and a video are available at www.wshc.sg. The new regulations, put together with industry and public feedback, will take effect from May 1.

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Chew Jay Hong (left) of River Valley Primary School taking a moment before spelling his word during last year's competition. ST FILE PHOTO

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