

WCCO: Japan's Asbestos Crisis

Health/Lifeline

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Japan's Asbestos Crisis

Companies Reveal Hundreds Of Deaths From Exposure

(AP) TOKYO One after another, Japanese companies have come forward for the first time to reveal that hundreds of employees who handled asbestos may have died from exposure, prompting worries of widespread contamination by the powerful carcinogen.

At least a dozen companies in recent days have released reports of more than 300 deaths possibly linked to asbestos, a fibrous natural mineral commonly used in insulation and other building materials until it was found to create dust that can cause cancer when inhaled.

Experts expect the actual number of exposed workers to be much higher than that. In 2003 alone, 878 people in Japan died of the asbestos-related cancer mesothelioma -- up from 500 in 1995. Mesothelioma is a cancer of the lining of the chest cavity, lungs or stomach, whose only known cause is asbestos.

The disclosures, begun last week when industrial equipment maker Kubota Corp. announced 79 workers at its asbestos-producing plants had died over several decades, have triggered allegations that Japanese laws have lagged behind those of other industrialized nations.

Insulation materials makers Nichias Corp. and A&A Material Corp., chemical maker Nippon Valqua Industries Ltd. and cement producer Taiheiyo Cement Corp. also have announced that dozens of workers had died in asbestos-linked illnesses. A total of 663 people have been recognized by the

government as eligible for special workers' compensation payments for exposure.

Kubota was believed to be the first Japanese company to independently disclose asbestos-linked deaths. The company hasn't said why it chose to make its announcement last week, and it's unclear why other companies followed suit.

While highly carcinogenic types of the material -- so-called blue and brown asbestos -- were banned in Japan in 1995, other forms of asbestos were not outlawed until last October. Asbestos was widely used in Japan as insulation and in roof tiles until the 1980s.

Even more worrying were reports from hospitals on Thursday of several women who died of mesothelioma even though they never worked at such plants. Experts suspect they were contaminated by dust brought home by their husbands.

Concerns are also high that demolition of older buildings filled with asbestos-based insulation has released the harmful dust into the air of Japan's densely populated cities. A new regulation on demolition of such buildings took effect only last week.

"In the early 1970s, Japan experienced a huge economic boom and built many buildings using asbestos. Now the time has come for those building to be torn down," warned Hirotada Hirose, professor at Tokyo Women's Christian University, and author of "Silent Time Bomb: Hazards of Asbestos."

"There is a danger that asbestos will be released into air and cause problems when demolished," he said. "It could become an environmental disaster."

Scientists have called the asbestos problem the silent killer because victims can develop related cancers -- including lung cancer -- many decades after exposure.

The tracking of such cases is complicated by what critics say is Japan's chronic lack of awareness about the problem -- meaning that asbestos-related cases in the past were misdiagnosed -- combined with companies' reluctance to publicize accounts of contamination.

"In Europe and the United States, it is fairly widely known that passive exposure can lead to mesothelioma, but in Japan ... most people don't know," Hirotaro Miura, assistant director of Yokosuka General Hospital Uwamachi, told public broadcaster NHK.

"So we need to implement measures that also account for these people as we try to identify the damage caused as quickly as possible," he added.

In the United States, lawmakers and special-interest groups have been struggling recently to negotiate the terms of a \$140 billion asbestos trust fund. The trust would be funded by U.S. manufacturers and insurance companies and shield them from future claims by people with asbestos-related illnesses. Past asbestos lawsuits bankrupted U.S. companies Owens Corning Fiberglas and W.R Grace.

The recent disclosures have sent Japanese government agencies scrambling to assess the depth of the problem.

The Trade Ministry is questioning 65 building material manufacturers for reports on contamination, while the Japan Asbestos Association is surveying member companies for similar information.

The association's executive director, Michio Fukuda, said that while such contamination cases were known about in the construction industry, the Kubota case made the problem widely known because people outside the company were affected.

"Before, even if these problems occurred, they were company matters and they dealt with it by themselves," Fukuda said. "But with Kubota, victims included people other than their own employees."

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