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EDITORIAL/ Asbestos illnesses: Moves are needed to control this ongoing menace.

07/04/2005

Ten percent of the people who worked with asbestos at a Kubota Corp. machinery manufacturing plant have died of cancer and asbestos-related illnesses, a stark indication of what a killer this health hazard is.

Kubota recently released data on the illnesses that affected its workers, including mesothelioma, a type of cancer of the chest and abdomen caused by asbestos, used in pipe manufacturing from 1957 to 1975.

The company used blue asbestos,

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which is especially carcinogenic, at its Hyogo Prefecture factory to reinforce water pipes. Since the first worker died of pneumoconiosis in 1979 and another from mesothelioma in 1986, a total of 78 people have succumbed to asbestos-related illnesses. Five people who lived near the plant were also afflicted with mesothelioma, and two of them have died.

While Kubota has a serious responsibility, it must be credited for openly releasing this health data on the affected workers. The disclosure should increase the public's confidence in the company.

Asbestos is a natural mineral fiber that is durable, fire-resistant and an electrical insulator. It was widely used in building insulation before its devastating health effects were known. The fine powder was blown onto steel beams and mixed into materials for roofing and outside walls. Its carcinogenic effects do not manifest themselves for 30 to 40 years after its victims inhale it, making it a "quiet time bomb."

Many people nationwide may be affected by asbestos. With its long latency period, more people



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are expected to develop serious asbestos illnesses. Other firms that formerly used asbestos must release their findings about their workers' health situations.

The Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare and the Environment Ministry should conduct surveys to get an overall picture of the problem. When mesothelioma settles in the lung area, there is no way to cure it, so many patients die within two years of diagnosis. Relief must also be planned for people living near factories who develop asbestos-related illnesses.

Why was this problem allowed to become so serious?

The International Labor Organization and other institutions began warning of the cancer-causing effects of asbestos in the early 1970s. Blue asbestos and white asbestos were both banned in 1975, but only as spray applications in Japan. But the toxic blue asbestos was not completely banned until 1995, and white asbestos was not finally barred for most uses until last year.

While the risks are obvious, the government ignored the reports

and delayed tightening regulations. The result is that workers and people living near factories that continued to use asbestos are paying with their lives.

This is yet another case in which the government failed to act properly to save lives, comparable to the Minamata disease caused by methyl mercury poisoning and the spread of AIDS caused by HIV-tainted blood products.

It is essential that there be a detailed investigation into the relationships between the operations using asbestos, their regulations and the hazards posed. Since 1986, Kubota has claimed government workers compensation for its workers who died from cancer, and such claims were approved in most cases. The former Labor Ministry must have been aware of that fact, yet it never notified homeowners living near the Kubota plant.

Now, buildings built using asbestos are aging and will soon be knocked down for redevelopment. What will happen when all that asbestos is freed to scatter to the winds?

This problem is not past. It is still
with us.

--The Asahi Shimbun, July 2
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