



Tokyo dispatch

Japan's asbestos time bomb

The failure of the world's second-largest economy to heed the health warnings over asbestos amounts to a national disgrace, writes Justin McCurry

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It was once embraced as the answer to the construction industry's prayers: a cheap, light and easily obtainable substance that would make buildings stronger, warmer and more resistant to fire. A quarter of a century has passed since the world was emphatically warned that asbestos was also a killer.

The material has been blamed for thousands of deaths, and has condemned its victims to years of suffering from lung cancer, pneumoconiosis and mesothelioma, a cancer of the chest and abdominal cavities of which asbestos inhalation is the only known cause.

While most of the industrialised world has banned or severely restricted the use of asbestos, the substance is now fuelling the rapid development of several Asian countries including China and Thailand.

Those countries could do worse than listen to the hundreds of stories of lives painfully cut short in Japan, which is only just coming to terms with the full horror of its former dependence on asbestos and the inept response of its government to the health consequences.

The most recent revelations began as a trickle at the end of last month when Kubota, a manufacturer of farm equipment, admitted that 79 former employees had died of cancer and other diseases linked to asbestos over the past few decades.

Then came the deluge: according to health ministry data almost 900 people died of mesothelioma in 2003 alone, and last week the trade ministry said nearly 400 people - and in several cases their relatives as well - working for dozens of companies had died from diseases caused by the inhalation of asbestos.

In the absence of a means of recording the incidence of such diseases among the myriad subcontractors that support the Japanese construction industry, the actual death toll is feared to be much higher.

Many of the victims were for years unaware that tiny fibres of asbestos had lodged themselves inside their lungs. Mesothelioma has an incubation period of between 20 and 40 years.

And yet 25 years after the World Health Organisation identified asbestos as a carcinogen, Japan's silent time bomb continues to tick.

Despite the warnings, blue and brown asbestos - the most carcinogenic forms - were not banned until 1995, and even then only in principle, while white asbestos, which is said to be a much weaker carcinogen, was outlawed only last year. Even with the bans in place, however, asbestos can still be used when no alternative materials are available. It is still found in gaskets for machinery, insulating plates for switchboards, chemical seals and industrial rope. A ban on all asbestos use will not go into effect until 2008.

It is not as if the government was unaware of the dangers: as long ago as the mid-70s, British studies on the health risks of asbestos prompted Japanese officials to urge firms and local authorities to warn local residents and encourage at-risk workers to undergo health checks. The directive was largely ignored.

Critics have likened the inaction over asbestos to the HIV scandal of the 1990s, when despite official knowledge of the risks involved, thousands of haemophiliacs acquired the Aids virus via unheated blood products.

Faced with overwhelming evidence of the misery asbestos has caused, the government has been forced to act. It has urged private firms to stop using the substance immediately and is drawing up a compensation plan for victims - though payments may only be forthcoming only if government inaction is found to have been responsible for their ill health.

Even so, feelings of culpability are running high in official circles, with the senior health minister Hiroyoshi Nishi admitting in parliament that the central government made a "crucial mistake" in ignoring the warnings of almost 30 years ago.

Health experts, meanwhile, warn that the worst is yet to come, when people who have been exposed in more recent times begin to show symptoms of asbestos-related diseases.

One expert has predicted that over a 40-year period starting in 2000, the number of deaths from the disease could exceed 100,000. Thought will also have to be given to how an unknown number of old, asbestos-laden buildings, including schools, can be demolished without posing a risk to both workers and nearby residents.

That so many people have had to die such long, painful deaths, is being called a national tragedy; that the majority of those deaths might have been prevented in this, the world's second-biggest economy, could fairly be described as a national disgrace.

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