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Exposure to asbestos can lead to lung disease

By MAE LORRAINE S. RAFOLS

In another twist to the term 'occupational hazard,' a recent study showed that construction workers, seamen and firefighters are at great risk of developing lung cancer – particularly those in close contact with asbestos, a construction material often used and patronized for its cheap price, but is banned and considered harmful in 40 countries.

Asbestos, called the 'magic mineral' because of its unique chemical composition is used for many construction products like tiles and cement.

According to Lung Center of the Philippines pulmonologist Dr. Dina V. Diaz, during the 1st Asbestos Forum spearheaded by the Philippine Ban Asbestos Network (PBAN) at the Occupational Health and Safety Center (OHSC) in Quezon City, microscopic airborne asbestos fibers are carcinogenic substances, and when inhaled, can cause various types of lung diseases.

Some of these pulmonary diseases are: calcified pleural plaques (thickening of the parietal pleura on the lower chest walls and diaphragm); Asbestosis (most common lung disease from asbestos, is the diffuse, interstitial or 'scarring' of the lungs); asbestos-related lung cancer (cancer of the inner lining of the lung); and mesothelioma (the most serious type of asbestos disease – a tumor on the outer lining of the lung that is usually fatal within two years of diagnosis).

What's more alarming is that the manifestation of asbestos-related diseases from the period of exposure can be as long as 60 years, and that medical practitioners who are not familiar with the disorder often mistake the ailment for tuberculosis or pneumonia, and end up administering the wrong medication.

Symptoms of asbestos-related diseases are: Persistent pain in the lower back, shoulder or chest wall, shortness of breath, appearance of lump or mass on chest wall, persistent dry cough, coughing-up blood, fatigue or anemia, weight loss for no apparent reason, hoarseness or change in voice, swelling of face or arms, abdominal pain and nausea.

Those greatly at risk are asbestos manufacturers, miners and millers of asbestos, people in construction trades (carpenters, electricians, plumbers and pipe fitters), power plant workers, boilermakers, shipyard workers and firefighters.

Dr. Diaz also stressed that the higher the inhaled dust from asbestos, the greater the health risk.

She also warned that smokers have 50 times greater risk of developing lung cancer as compared to non-smokers exposed to asbestos dust.

There is no known cure for lung diseases caused by asbestos. The most doctors can do is provide treatment for symptomatic relief from dry cough, immunization for other ailments that lung diseases can trigger, and immediate remedy for shortness of breath.

The health issues concerning asbestos is the main reason why PBAN is pushing for the total ban of asbestos in the Philippines.

In its position paper entitled "Exposing the silent killer: Asbestos and the risks Filipinos face," PBAN disclosed that in the construction industry, more than a million asbestos-containing cement boards are cheaply sold, exposing many people to the dangers of the material.

A Chemical Control Order (CCO) for asbestos (or Department Order 2000-02) was released in order to regulate the use of asbestos in the country.

However, according to PBAN lead proponent, Dr. Marlito Cardenas, the CCO does not adequately cover various issues that guarantee safe asbestos use.

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