

EU orders UK to tighten asbestos laws

A reasoned opinion under EU infringement procedures issued by the European Commission indicates that the UK regulations on asbestos at work do not comply fully with the parent EU Directive. The Commission wants the UK to amend legislative provisions which exempt some maintenance and repair activities from the application of the EU Directive on the protection of workers from asbestos.

The opinion follows a complaint to the Commission that Article 3(3) (a) and (b) of the Asbestos Directive 2009/148/EC has not been correctly transposed into UK law. Article 3(3) offers the possibility for an exemption from three obligations set out in the Directive for activities that involve sporadic and low-intensity exposure to asbestos, such as in the case of some maintenance and repair activities. In the Commission's view, the UK law omits specific parts of Article 3(3)(a) and (b) and widens the scope of the exemption.

The UK now has two months to bring its legislation into line with EU law, or risk the matter being referred to the EU's Court of Justice, reports IOSH's magazine, Safety and Health.

HSE denies asbestos campaign was cut to save money

The HSE has rejected suggestions that its "Hidden Killer" asbestos awareness campaign was dropped due to government budget cuts. Construction union UCATT claimed that the campaign was delayed due to a freeze on government communications spending, and that the HSE has no intention of reinstating it. UCATT wrote to the Work and Pensions Secretary Iain Duncan Smith insisting that the campaign be reinstated. It has the backing of Labour MP Natascha Engel, who introduced an Early Day Motion to this effect.

However an HSE spokesperson has refuted the suggestion that the campaign has been cancelled, and said that it is usual for the HSE to take stock at the end of each phase of a campaign to judge its success, and that Hidden Killer is currently at this stage. It stated that all the campaign information is freely available online and that the HSE continues to publicise every asbestos prosecution to raise awareness of the issue.

Around the World News – Exposure to mercury in skin-lightening creams

A New York City bio-monitoring study has revealed that thousands of women may have been exposed to dangerous levels of inorganic mercury from imported skin-lightening creams, reports Environmental Health Perspectives. Analysis of urine specimen from 1,840 adult New Yorkers collected during the survey yielded a geometric mean mercury concentration of 0.72 µg/L, slightly higher than the national average of 0.5 µg/L. The authors took note when 13 women were found to have urine mercury concentrations exceeding the state's reportable level of 20 µg/L; four women had levels exceeding 50 µg/L. All 13 highly exposed women were Hispanic or black, and ten had been born in the Dominican Republic. Each of the nine women interviewed on follow-up had used mercury-containing skin-lightening cream. One such product sampled contained 6,190 ppm mercury, when the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) limit for mercury in skin-care products is 1 ppm.

Extrapolating from the population sampled, the authors estimate that nearly 27,000 New Yorkers may have urine mercury levels exceeding 20 µg/L. Previous studies suggest that kidney and neurologic toxicity may occur when urine mercury levels exceed 20 µg/L. New York City Health officials responded to the survey results by seizing 12 brands of illegally imported cosmetics from store shelves which listed mercury as an active ingredient. The Pan American Health Organization called on the Dominican

Republic to stop manufacturing the products, and the Dominican Secretary of Health has reportedly notified all laboratories to stop manufacturing mercury-containing skin-care products.

Third-hand smoke exposure raises new concerns

The Journal Environmental Health Perspective reports that third-hand smoke (THS), the “toxic brew” of residual tobacco smoke pollutants that linger on room and car surfaces and in dust long after smoke has cleared from a room, could be hazardous to health. Research has suggested that smoke compounds absorb into surfaces and then ‘desorb’ back into the air over time.

Previous studies have found that smoke condensate painted onto mice caused cancer, and a 2010 study showed that THS remained in smokers’ house even after they had been vacant for two months and had been fitted with new carpets and paint.

Other studies suggest that by touching contaminated surfaces intoxicants can be ingested or absorbed into the body. Researchers are concerned that small children might be particularly exposed and more susceptible to toxicants if they crawl over, touch and mouth contaminated surfaces, therefore ingesting much higher doses of toxicants than older children and adults. Cleaning staff in hotels could also receive high THS exposures, for example by handling THS-contaminated bedding, as could the spouses of smokers. The journal reports that court cases are beginning to appear in the USA in which claimants cite these alleged dangers.