

Ombudsman's report about asbestos

The Acting NSW Ombudsman Professor John McMillan today tabled his special report to Parliament *'Asbestos: How NSW government agencies deal with the problem'*.

This is a follow-up to a special report made in November 2010. That report drew attention to serious gaps in the NSW Government's response to asbestos and how it can be handled safely.

The Government accepted the majority of recommendations in the 2010 report and introduced important changes to the way asbestos is managed in NSW.

'NSW is now widely recognised in Australia as having a best practice approach to managing asbestos. Much of this is due to the work of the Heads of Asbestos Coordination Authorities (HACA), which was established following our 2010 report', the Ombudsman said.

HACA has made significant progress in raising awareness of the dangers of asbestos across the NSW community. The Government established a hotline - 1800 asbestos - which people can ring for free advice. Important steps have been taken to improve practices for the safe removal and disposal of asbestos. **'These initiatives demonstrate what can be achieved when government departments collaborate successfully towards a common goal'**, said the Ombudsman.

'But there is much work yet to be done. Hundreds of people in NSW continue to be diagnosed with asbestos-related diseases', said Professor McMillan. **'Many of them are part of the 'third wave' of asbestos related diseases – do-it-yourself renovators of homes built before 1987.'**

'Despite a concerted effort by a number of key government agencies, research shows that 47% of DIY home renovators don't look for risks from asbestos before renovating, and 32% remove the asbestos themselves', the Ombudsman said. **'More needs to be done to educate home renovators about the risks of asbestos and how to work safely.'**

The Government did not accept a recommendation made in the 2010 Ombudsman report to introduce a vendor disclosure law. **'People who buy or rent a property have a right to know if there is asbestos there'**, said Professor McMillan. **'I urge the Government to require vendors of properties built before 1987 to certify whether they are free from asbestos.'** This is consistent with the Australian Government Asbestos Management Review report of June 2012.

'Another worrying concern is a continuing lack of awareness within Aboriginal communities about safe asbestos handling', the Ombudsman said. Many people in regional Aboriginal communities live in dwellings made from fibro, some of which are deteriorating, exposing residents to dangerous asbestos. Others, such as the Baryulgil community, live on asbestos contaminated land, a legacy of an asbestos mine situated on a naturally occurring asbestos reef. **'Education specifically tailored for regional Aboriginal communities has been developed but needs to be properly funded. This education campaign should continue until all asbestos has been safely removed from these communities. Until then, these communities continue to be at risk.'**

Funding from the James Hardie education fund, used for the past 10 years to raise awareness about the dangers of asbestos with home renovators, has run out. The Government's commitment of \$4 million over 4 years to fund a range of research, education, prevention and coordination activities runs out in mid-2018. HACA does not receive specific government funding. It relies on individual government agencies, primarily Safework NSW, diverting resources from their other responsibilities.

'This is a significant and continuing public health problem', said the Ombudsman. **'The Government has not committed to properly funding initiatives to educate the public about the dangers of asbestos, clean-up dangerous asbestos disposal sites, and improve practices for the safe removal and disposal of asbestos. It is vital the good work of HACA continues in order to reduce the serious health risks that asbestos currently poses to the NSW community.'**

The report will be available on the NSW Ombudsman's website after tabling.

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