

Hong Kong Workers' Health Centre

Press Statement

Concern on the Occupational & Public Health Issue caused by Improperly Disposal of Suspected Asbestos-containing Materials

News concerning the improper disposal of suspected asbestos containing materials (ACM) in Hong Kong (HK) was published on 28th January 2013. According to the news, a large number of construction wastes (occupying about half of the size of a basketball court) had been disposed improperly in the rural area of Tsuen Wan District, HK. Suspected ACM, mainly pieces of corrugated cement sheet, were also found in the wastes. Concerned parties worried that this illegal disposal of construction wastes and ACM would pose harm to the residents and the environment nearby and thus, they filed complaints to the government. Some follow up actions were reported by the government, especially by the Environmental Protection Department (EPD). EPD responded that they have attempted to trace the source and the producer of the construction waste but it was not successful. No legal actions can be made because of this reason.

Hong Kong Workers' Health Centre (HKWHC), a non-government organization founded in 1984 with her vision to protect the occupational health of workers, is highly concerned about the occupational health of the related construction workers and also the public health posed by improper handling of ACM.

Actually back in early 2011, HKWHC has already noticed similar problem of improper handling of suspected ACM at the construction site of the Hong Kong section of the Guangzhou-Shenzhen-Hong Kong Express Rail Link. Officers of HKWHC conducted a field inspection in the construction site located in Choi Yuen Village in January 2011. From the inspection they discovered that suspected ACM pieces were scattered all over the place inside the site. A piece of suspected ACM was randomly selected and collected on the ground and the sample was sent to a registered asbestos laboratory for further identification. The sample was tested positive for the presence of chrysotile. Later in March, HKWHC held a press conference to report this issue and urged the government to reinforce the control and surveillance of the demolition works and proper disposal of asbestos containing wastes to protect the health of the workers working inside the site and the residents living nearby.

The news published on 28th January reflects that the control and surveillance of asbestos works conducted by the government was still ineffective and insufficient. HKWHC urged the government once again in re-enforcing the current regulation, requesting the contractors of all construction works, despite the scale and type of the work, to report their work before they start. Contractors have to employ registered asbestos consultant to prove the presence of ACM in the affected area. If ACM is found present, proper abatement procedure must be undertaken.

Besides, the issue brought up also reveals that many residents of HK do not understand or familiar of the legal requirement in asbestos controls and the hazard of asbestos. HKWHC urged the government to carry out appropriate preventive education among general public and the industry to raise their awareness and protect them against the exposure of asbestos.