



Joint media statement from asbestos victims groups

Friday 9 May, 2014

Asbestos victims urge rejection of Commission of Audit recommendation that independent Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency be abolished

Representatives of asbestos victim groups and support organisations across Australia are calling on Employment Minister Eric Abetz to reject a recommendation of the National Commission of Audit that the independent Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency, and its governing Council, be abolished as a budget saving measure.

Set up last year with bipartisan support, ASEA had been given the task of providing a nationally coordinated approach to improving asbestos education, and moving towards the eradication of the deadly product, which is still found in millions of Australian homes and workplaces.

Asbestos victims are warning that at a time when Australia continues to have the highest per capita rate of asbestos diseases in the world — with a death toll that has already exceeded 33,000 people — the loss of the independent national body set up to address the situation will have potentially deadly consequences for thousands of Australians.

Experts estimate that up to 40,000 Australians that have been exposed to asbestos will die from agonising asbestos-caused diseases. We believe that it is absolutely imperative that all efforts be made to protect the community from further exposure to asbestos.

The formation of an independent national agency was a key recommendation of the Asbestos Management Review. This proposal was overwhelmingly supported by asbestos victims, who campaigned to see the Agency's formation. It also enjoyed bipartisan parliamentary support.

In addition, the Asbestos Safety and Eradication Council — which is made up of medical, legal, safety, industry and other experts, along with an elected representative of victims groups — was formed to ensure this new agency had the best possible guidance for its challenging task.

Already, the Agency has begun to make a difference in the fight against asbestos disease, working towards a nationally consistent response to prevent the tens of thousands of future cases of asbestos related diseases predicted by medical experts.

The National Commission of Audit has recommended the unwinding of that process, with ASEA to be consumed by the vast Department of Employment, and its governing Council abolished.

We are urging the Employment Minister, his colleagues in the Coalition Government, Opposition MPs, the minor parties and independents to retain the bipartisan support for action on this issue that led to the Agency's formation.

This issue shouldn't be about saving a small amount of money, it must be about saving lives. Rolling out a coordinated national approach to community education and asbestos eradication will do just that. The alternative option, as recommended by the Commission of Audit, will do the opposite, seeing us return to a patchwork approach.

As people who have been directly touched by asbestos — either through personal exposure or the loss of family, friends and workmates — we believe the ongoing existence of a strong, independent body focused on coordinating asbestos issues nationally is essentially to turning the tide on this scourge.

Joint signatories:

Barry Robson (President, Asbestos Diseases Foundation of Australia): 0407 235 685

Karen Banton (CEO, Bernie Banton Foundation): 1800 031 731

Rod Smith (Operations Manager, Bernie Banton Foundation): 0418 319 757

Simon Cocker (President, Asbestos Free Tasmania): 0419 402 377

Ian Sheppard (President, Asbestos Diseases Society of South Australia): 0403 914 663

Terry Miller (President, Asbestos Victims Association (SA)): 0418 807 834

Robert Vojakovic (President, Asbestos Diseases Society of Australia): 08 9344 4077

Raymond Colbert (Secretary, Asbestos Related Disease Support Society QLD): 0439 101 114