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LawTalk Blog



## Asbestos Awareness Week. A time to reflect

**Date: Wednesday November 5, 2014**

[Asbestos Awareness Week](#) is an annual event that has been held since 2011. It is organised by the South Australian State Government (through SafeWork SA) as well as asbestos victims' groups who work tirelessly to support victims of asbestos-related disease and their families.

This year's Asbestos Awareness Week will run from Monday 24 November through to Friday 28 November 2014 and it is an important time to reflect on the lives lost to the scourge of asbestos-related disease; but the week also acts as a salient reminder that the [risk of asbestos exposure](#) is still a common and complex problem in today's Australian society.

According to many official figures, asbestos-related diseases kill hundreds of Australians each year; and thousands more are presenting with symptoms. This sad wave of illness has not yet peaked, and it is anticipated that many more victims will suffer in the years ahead.

The dangers of asbestos have spread from the workplace to the community. The first cases of asbestos-related disease presented with asbestos mining, which ceased in Australia in 1983. But by the time Australia placed a national ban on the production, importation and use of all forms of asbestos in December 2003, so much more damage had already been done.

More cases continued to arise, not just in workers - but their families as well - as a result of exposure to asbestos-containing products (including during the construction of buildings, or washing work clothes covered in asbestos dust, renovating the family holiday house or even playing in the backyard where asbestos debris may have been stacked).

A study published in the Medical Journal of Australia in September 2011 confirmed the fears of asbestos victims groups across the nation; namely that the next wave of disease victims is coming from DIY home renovators. After examining figures from Western Australia, the study concluded that exposure to asbestos during home renovation is an increasing problem, and these cases seem to have a shorter latency period than other types of exposure. The study warned that such cases related to renovation will probably

continue to increase because of the many homes that have contained, and still contain, asbestos building products.

Given the above information and the data from several studies, it is apparent that the need for an Asbestos Awareness Week could not be any more compelling. The week focuses on how individuals and businesses can reduce the risks associated with asbestos exposure.

For example, in the workplace, checking, compiling or re-reading an Asbestos Register is an excellent means of reinforcing awareness of the risks associated with asbestos exposure. In the home, it is important that people, particularly renovators, make sure they know what materials are in their house. This may mean having these materials identified and tested. This does cost money, but we firmly believe it is time and money well invested that might help save their lives.

The State Government has recently strengthened protections regarding the risks of asbestos exposure when they introduced the new [Work Health and Safety laws](#). These laws have enhanced asbestos safety in numerous ways, including:

- Improved competency of asbestos workers and supervisors who undertake licensed asbestos removal;
- Increased supervision of licensed work through requiring supervisors to be on-site for Class A asbestos removal work (and readily available for Class B work);
- Improved licensee safety requirements such as an obligation for a certified safety management system, an obligation to inform relevant parties of intended removal work, requirements in relation to limiting access to removal areas, providing signage, providing decontamination facilities, requiring the appropriate disposal of waste including personal protective equipment (PPE) and requiring specific safe work methods when removing friable asbestos;
- Stronger requirements for asbestos to be identified and to be assumed as such if the material cannot be identified;
- Extensive requirements for identifying and removing asbestos prior to any demolition or refurbishment;
- Provision of health monitoring for all asbestos removal workers who have a risk of being exposed;
- Requiring an asbestos management plan for all asbestos identified on site; etc.

Legal changes are important, but community awareness and education is equally, if not more important (particularly relating to the identification, removal and disposal of asbestos material).

At Andersons, we strongly support the objectives of the annual Asbestos Awareness Week. Whilst it is crucial to remember the victims of asbestos-related disease and support the families of the victims, it is also crucial to openly discuss the ongoing dangers associated with asbestos exposure in an attempt to reduce the number of asbestos victims in the future.

If you believe that you are suffering symptoms that may be related to exposure to asbestos, you should immediately consult with your healthcare professional. If you or a family member has been diagnosed with an asbestos-related disease, you should contact today's blog writer to discuss your legal rights and possible [entitlement to compensation](#).

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