

3M Transcript for the following interview: Ep-16-Asbestos - Future of Asbestos in Australia

Mark Reggers (R) Peter Tighe (T)

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Welcome to the 3M Science of Safety podcast presented by 3M Australia and New Zealand Personal Safety Division. This is a podcast that is curious about the signs and systems of all things work, health and safety, that keep workers safe and protect their health. I am Mark Reggers, an occupational hygienist, who likes to ask the questions Why, How, and Please Explain. Whether you are a safety professional, occupational hygienist, or someone with any level of WHS responsibility in the workplace, maybe you are a user of safety products or maybe you are a bit of a safety nerd who finds this stuff really interesting, then this is a podcast for you.

(R) Today we're doing our last and current asbestos series with Peter Tighe. Welcome Peter!

(T) Thanks Mark.

(R) For those who haven't listened to our previous episode and I do suggest that you do pause it now and go and listen to those, can you please introduce yourself, where are you from and what do you do?

(T) Ok. I'm the chief executive officer of the Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency but historically I've had quite a bit to do with work, health and safety over my working life and I've been with the agency since its inception in 2013 but the agency came about because of an inquiry in relation to how we were managing

asbestos in Australia. In 2011 and 2012, there was a group that travelled around Australia talking to all stakeholders about the issues associated with asbestos and out of that process, twelve recommendations went to the government of the day that had cross-party support to develop a new agency that purely had the responsibility to look after the management of asbestos and we've been going now five years and we work to a national strategic plan. That strategic plan has six components, awareness; so, it's about raising public awareness, best practice; looking at best practice in relation to the management of asbestos, removal; the issues associated with the removal of asbestos given we were one of the great users of this wonder product.

(R) We were, that we were yes.

(T) Identification; better methods of identification in relation to asbestos, research; to give us the evidence base as to what we are going to do, and then international leadership given that we're the only country in the world that has a standalone agency dealing with asbestos.

(R) Because in our previous episodes, I guess, we've spoken, I have spoken with a few different guests about the history of asbestos and we spoke last about the importation, I guess, in this particular chat, where do we go from here? So, since the inception of the agency, you're saying 2013, what are sort of the highlights that have been achieved in the last sort of four to five years that I guess you're quite proud of?

(T) I think really over the last five years and you know from small beginnings, we've lifted the level of discussion about asbestos so there's more awareness in the general public and we've been monitoring this, we have a longitudinal survey that takes place every couple of years to see what the level of knowledge is with householders, tradespeople, builders, and people who are likely to come across

asbestos products and we know that that's been increasing but we do know that there is a lack of detail especially with people in the residential sector, they don't really understand, they might be aware they've got asbestos-containing materials in their house, they're not quite sure how to manage that or what to do if they're doing renovations or structural changes to their buildings so that's one of our target areas for the future. Quantifying where our asbestos is, trying to ensure that there is an easy way to transport and dispose of asbestos so that we get away from the issues associated with illegal dumping and we make it a very transparent and easy system to operate in if you are generally wanting to assist in removal of asbestos out of the building environment. Well the things that have come into place since the agency's birth I think is firstly lifting that level of awareness and people understanding where our legacy asbestos is and how to manage it and how to effectively manage it. The other issues are that we're really, I think, moving ahead at a state and territory level, the Victorian government now has its own Victorian asbestos eradication agency that's dealing with public assets and we're getting much more focus in each of the jurisdictions about the issues of prosecutions of about illegal dumping, people are more aware of where asbestos is and how to manage it and some of the risks associated with it. The profile in relation to asbestos with things like the Mr Fluffy insulation and dealing with that has been an issue dealt with in the ACT and New South Wales very effectively, so I think the focus on managing asbestos and improving the management on an overall sense has lifted dramatically over the last five years. One of the other focuses that the agency has to meet under its national strategic plan is international leadership and from that perspective, we've been undertaking training in some of the Asian countries, I've been up lecturing in relation to asbestos management in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam, we're assisting with some of their programs in moving towards bans and the use of asbestos and we are lifting the levels of education with those countries that have historically used asbestos but been unaware of the health risks associated with it.

(R) I know as a hygienist and I'm a licensed asbestos assessor as well, I know in the last few years I've definitely seen the reports that you guys are putting out, so I know in my little circle of things, I'm definitely seeing the work that you're doing, and it's definitely appreciated. So, a couple of the common questions that I guess, previous in my working life delivering asbestos awareness training I wanted to put to you, just get your thoughts on the situation. You mentioned before about asbestos in homes and that's probably a big area of risk there, where do you think that's going to go to make people aware of that asbestos that may be in their house or may be when they're buying a house?

(T) Well, we have a requirement for commercial buildings, if a building was built prior to 2003 that they must have an asbestos register and that asbestos register is basically a product of an audit identifying where the asbestos is and a management plan once you have the register in place so that you can understand the risks associated with asbestos. What we're very keen to see in the domestic residential area is a similar sort of thing that exists in a commercial area where the asbestos had been identified, we know what type of asbestos is and we know what the risk is and that should be something that is supplied to a purchaser so that the vendor would supply that material to a purchaser so that they know when they buy a building the sorts of risks that they're embracing and can manage those risks effectively so I think that would be a very positive step forward. There have been some movements in government, the real estate institute in New South Wales are very keen to see something in that area and we think there are some legs in relation to taking that forward as an overarching policy for government.

(R) I know I have and most people when they buy a house they get the building inspection to make its you know obviously constructed and not going to fall on them, the pest inspection so for it does not seem too much at all to add an asbestos inspection into those particular property checks. I know in some of the properties that I've bought over the years is that my building inspections specifically said, we

did not look for asbestos. When I've done training, I had people go, oh my building inspector looked for asbestos you know so I think having something mandatory to cover that, it would be a fantastic step, but time will tell but hopefully from what you guys are doing and moving in that particular direction.

(T) I think there is an appetite for that and when you look at public safety and you're not just looking at the person that buys a residency, you're talking about people that may come in to do maintenance on that property, neighbourhood, people whom might just be providing services in there, simple things like someone who is coming into hang new curtains and blinds might need to know that because they are going to be drilling into the structure and they may generate asbestos fibres in relation to that work so that information I think is really worthwhile if we are going to deal with the issues in relation to asbestos-related diseases.

(R) The other most common question I used to get when delivering asbestos awareness training was the cost to legally take it to an improved waste collector, I've done a bit of training with a lot of councils and these are the guys that are picking up the waste off the side of the road, is there any sort of action or initiative around trying to make that more affordable to take it to the tip? I know I've seen a few councils here in New South Wales who have like asbestos drop-off days obviously bags and in small quantities because I think that's another area that is a barrier to people doing the right thing.

(T) Look, there is a need to coordinate all those with a responsibility in that area. We have local governments, but they have to work within the environmental protection agencies that operate in the state. The environmental protection agencies are responsible for transport and disposal and transporting can be quite expensive for large amounts of asbestos and disposal is a big issue in relation to small amounts of asbestos because most facilities that accept asbestos have a set fee and even for half a dozen sheets that might be being disposed, firstly there is a

set fee which is around about \$200 in New South Wales and that's a component of an environmental levy that the state has in place plus a fee that's charged by the disposal facility and if we can make disposal of asbestos a very less costly exercise, then we think will get better outcomes in relation to illegal dumping and in fact removal of asbestos.

(R) I'd agree a hundred percent there because I would get a lot of feedback in previous times where that was, that was the main barrier. So, we've looked at the past, I guess, what you've done in the last five years and there's been a lot of fantastic initiatives, what is the next four or five years look like, the next plan to lead internationally and what can we do and build upon what's already been achieved?

(T) Well, we're discussing the next iteration of the plan at the present time with all our stakeholders which is not only governments of the day but also unions, employers, victims' association, professional associations, the asbestos removal contractors, demolition contractors, all have an input into this. What we really want to do for is for the next five years get into a proactive phase about how do we get rid of asbestos out of our total environment so that means we've got to start the target asbestos that's past its useful life where it's starting to deteriorate, we need to talk to governments about how we might do that, how we might fund it, can we follow some of the international, the examples the Dutch are removing all their asbestos roofing, can we do that, can we get the levels of awareness up so that everyone who may become exposed to asbestos knows what to do and how to manage that, they're the two critical things awareness and a targeted process for removal and safe disposal of asbestos is where we really need to go over the next couple of years.

(R) There are so many Super Six roof sheets that are still out there and have been out there for fifty, sixty, seventy years that as you say would be, they've come to

the end of their useful life and every year that continues is potentially more exposure to more people that shouldn't have to happen really.

(T) Well we do know those products are moving from a bonded state to what they call a friable state where they are releasing fibres and that's when it becomes dangerous so there really is a priority need to address those deteriorated products that are out there in the built society at the present time.

(R) We've spoken fairly broadly about concepts, but do you have any numbers or statistics how much this is affecting Australians, Australian workplaces I guess as a country that would sort of help put in perspective that this is real, and people are being affected by asbestos.

(T) Yes, we do, I mean we monitor deaths from mesothelioma which is the worst form of asbestos-related diseases and incurable cancer basically a death sentence. We have 700 people die from mesothelioma a year but recent research in relation to associated cancers caused by asbestos raises the number to 4000 per annum, now that's much greater than our road toll.

(R) Wow.

(T) And we're now drilling down to identify exactly which cancers are caused by asbestos but the global research in relation to the burden of diseases identifies 4000 deaths in Australia and it's based on scientific research and an algorithm in relation to the number of cancer deaths. So, given that is a real statistic, what we really need to look at is the cost in Australian society in relation those numbers of deaths and how can we prevent those deaths. The only way we can prevent them that will bring them down to a sliding scale back to zero is to get rid of asbestos because it's the causation.

(R) When you look at hierarchy controls elimination, get rid of the asbestos I mean what I guess is much broader than in a workplace or in a work situation we're talking from a public health point of view, get rid of it.

(T) As people live longer, because of the long gestation period of asbestos-related diseases, we are going to naturally have more deaths and the cost to our medical system is going to be far greater so it's an issue that all governments of Australia really have to focus on because we need to act now to prevent deaths into the future.

(R) You know the Adam Sager story is one that sort of hits home, I don't know if you can sort of explain what that situation was and because that's sort of just, it's quite tragic but just sort of reinforces that it could happen to anyone from that exposure of, of a low to a high amount.

(T) Well, that is a terrible example. Adam's story is a really sad occurrence. Adam, as a toddler, around about 18 months to two years of age was assisting his parents in sanding back their property in Queensland, they'd bought a Queensland which had asbestos sheeting throughout the building, while mum and dad was sanding the walls down young Adam was moving around with his little dustpan sweeping up the residue. Twenty plus years later, at age 26, he died of mesothelioma an incurable cancer. A fit, young, Martial Arts student, never had anything wrong with him throughout his life, the only exposure to asbestos was the incident with his parents, you can imagine how they felt, lack of knowledge, lack of understanding about asbestos, twenty years on, cause of death of their son.

(R) And that point in time asbestos wasn't fully banned so there's no laws being broken as far as that regard goes, I guess if the thing I thought about when I first heard the story like why not the mum and the dad, not that you want anyone but I



guess that it just shows how indiscriminate that, who may be affected and who may not be, you know, they probably may be breathing in more who knows?

(T) That's true, I mean asbestos is selective in relation to its victims. You can have half a dozen people exposed to it and the other five might be fine and the sixth one will come down with an asbestos-related disease. We don't know why, we think it might have something to do with genetics, but we don't have enough research in that area, its continuing research taking place to try and get preventative mechanisms in place but short-term exposure for a medium level of asbestos fibres in the air can lead to one of these horrendous diseases. So, the only way that we can resolve that issue is to get rid of the asbestos.

(R) So where can people can resources? I know we have definitely skimmed the surface on all these particular topics and where we've been and where we're going, where can they go to get more resources?

(T) Well you can find us on all the social media sites, we're on Twitter, asbestos safety at asbestos safety, we've also got a very comprehensive website and we do have an inquiries number there if you wanted to send us an email number if you go to the website you'll find that and we're also contactable on 1300 number 1300 326 148 but our website is probably the best option because there are a number of links to a variety of bodies that have specialist information about asbestos.

(R) Fantastic. I know I've definitely used those resources many a times. Thank you so much Peter for coming in, sort of, sort of tie off our asbestos-related episodes so yeah thanks for coming in.

(T) Thanks very much Mark for having me here. It's great to get that information out to the public.

(R) Fantastic. Well thanks for listening everyone. If you have any questions, comments, suggestions for future topics or guests you think we should get into the studio, you can shoot us an email to [scienceofsafetyanz@mmm.com](mailto:scienceofsafetyanz@mmm.com). You can also contact us via that email if you need any information around PPE or like a visit to your workplace to provide assistance around the appropriate selection, use and maintenance of any safety equipment for your workplace, 3M are here to help. You can also visit our podcast website at [www.3m.com.au/sospodcast](http://www.3m.com.au/sospodcast) for further information about this episode and any of our other episodes that we've done already. Be sure to subscribe to the podcast through Apple podcast or wherever you get this podcast from so you don't miss any future episodes. If you enjoyed this podcast or found it informative, we would really appreciate if you could take a few moments to leave us a review as it really does help other people find the podcast. And as Cavett Robert said, "if you don't think every day is a good one just try missing one". Thanks for listening and have a safe day.