Parliamentary Assembly
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COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Recommendation 1369 (1998)[1]

Dangers of asbestos for workers and the environment

Parliamentary Assembly

1. The pathogenic consequences of significant exposure to asbestos are now clearly proven, and even slight exposure to asbestos appears to entail serious health risks.

2. The Assembly is aware of the situation in Council of Europe member states regarding the use of asbestos, and of the work of a number of international organisations, such as the European Union (EU), the International Labour Organisation (ILO), World Health Organization (WHO) and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

3. It is convinced that radical measures are needed where adequate regulations do not exist and that such measures should be co-ordinated between member states.

4. Several factors have led to the development of asbestos substitutes, including scientific research, public awareness of the dangers of asbestos and initiatives by certain companies who have seen a need for such products. These products are less hazardous to humans and given the above developments some countries have successfully introduced bans on asbestos use; the Assembly therefore welcomes ongoing research into the use of substitutes, and comparative evaluation of biological activity of chrysotile asbestos and so-called "asbestos substitutes". However, taking into account the current level of knowledge of the health effect of substitutes, the statement that they are "environmentally pure" is premature.

5. The use of asbestos should be eliminated where current technological knowledge permits, modern technologies ensuring safety of those working with asbestos should be developed and used, the handling of asbestos in any form should be subject to stringent health and safety regulations, and past, present and possible future use must be placed under strict supervision.

6. Solutions to the problems posed by asbestos should not be limited to reducing the extent of asbestos use, nor to Europe alone. Member states should be concerned about the situation in other parts of the world and adopt measures to combat the harmful effects of asbestos in the health and social fields over several decades

7. The asbestos situation in Europe varies from country to country. The Assembly stresses in particular that national laws, while largely restrictive, do not all limit the use of asbestos to the same extent and also that the wide diversity of scientific methods and units of measurement often makes it harder to compare national situations and constitutes an obstacle to co-operation between states, that the public, and particularly workers, are not uniformly aware of the dangers of asbestos, which prevents most of them from taking precautions, and that financial and technical resources are concentrated in some countries and lacking in others.

8. The Assembly accordingly asks the Committee of Ministers to invite member states to act and take the following measures: in the medium term:

8.1. eliminate asbestos use except for technically appropriate cases in accordance with a time-table geared to what is nationally possible, opting for an increase in the use of less pathogenic substances than asbestos and introducing an effective monitoring system;

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1. Assembly debate on 22 April 1998 (13th Sitting) (see Doc. 8015, report of the Social, Health and Family Affairs Committee, rapporteur: Mr Cox; and Doc. 8084, opinion of the Committee on the Environment, Regional Planning and Local Authorities, rapporteur: Mr Onaindia). Text adopted by the Assembly on 22 April 1998 (13th Sitting).

8.2. set up the medical and social facilities needed to deal with the foreseeable increase in the number of persons suffering from asbestos-related diseases, given the latent nature of those diseases;

8.3. introduce environmental rehabilitation policies for areas, primarily mining and industrial sites, which have been significantly exposed to asbestos, and provide financial resources to enable concrete results to be achieved;

8.4. make provision for the retraining of asbestos workers in related fields, such as asbestos removal and, more broadly, environmental rehabilitation; in the short term:

8.5. draw on the work done by international organisations in this field and, in particular, on ILO Convention No. 162 and Recommendation No. 172, the ILO Codes of Practice and European Union directives, and utilise the wide experience of countries such as Denmark who have had an asbestos ban in place since 1987 in order to:

a. extend protection and information measures concerning the harmful effects of asbestos to workers in all potentially hazardous occupations, and particularly those where exposure to asbestos is only indirectly linked to the production process (electricians, car mechanics, etc.);

b. discover and identify types of asbestos used and determine the quantitative content of asbestos in all installations, and eliminate the use of technologies allowing the release of free asbestos fibres into the environment;

c. provide proper medical supervision for workers by strengthening the role and resources of occupational medical services, making them independent of firms and enabling them to continue monitoring workers who move to other firms;

8.6. help to guarantee the independence of the expert appraisals to be made both of the state of long-established applications and of such action as may need to be taken;

8.7. set up a group of scientists having different points of view for comparative study of the effects of different types of asbestos;

8.8. improve social coverage for sick workers by extensively recognising asbestos-related occupational diseases, and specifically not making such recognition conditional on the patient's producing proof of occupational exposure, and by giving doctors a greater role in informing patients of the possibly occupational nature of their illness;

8.9. provide adequate health and social coverage for patients suffering from asbestos-related illnesses which have not been shown to be occupational;

8.10. give absolute priority to information and training for all the populations concerned, specialist workers and general public alike, to enable them to make an informed contribution to management of the asbestos risk;

8.11. encourage co-operation between scientific bodies in various countries to facilitate, in particular, comparison of the effects of national measures and provide a clearer picture of national situations;

8.12. encourage research to develop substitutes for asbestos;

8.13. provide financial assistance, in the form of grants or tax incentives, to encourage industry, authorities and individuals to take the measures needed to reduce risks.

9. The Assembly also thinks it essential that the countries of Europe should conclude multilateral agreements, for example in the framework of the European Union co-operation agreements, in order to:

9.1. encourage the exchange of information, and of technical and human resources, with a view to measuring asbestos concentrations and eliminating future asbestos use in all parts of Europe;

9.2. draw the attention of non-European countries to the dangers of uncontrolled and irresponsible asbestos use, especially in countries where rapid urban growth and a lack of resources together create a situation where use of this substance is inadequately controlled;

9.3. maintain with producing countries relations which ensure that health standards at production sites are as stringent as possible;

9.4. promote in international organisations programmes to help asbestos producer and user countries to halt – within periods to be determined in the light of their different situations – the production, processing or importing of asbestos

10. The Assembly calls, moreover, for the rapid reaction of civil society and for the strengthening of the role of social partners in order to:

10.1. promote, in firms and in professional sectors or groups, information, reflection and the taking of decisions on health and safety at work, to ensure, inter alia, that employees overcome their fatalistic attitude to the effects of working conditions on health;

10.2. inform the public of the standards which must be respected when asbestos is being used or destroyed, and when air is being monitored, and also inform them of the legal remedies available when these standards are violated.

11. The Assembly also calls on member states to seek to ensure that products containing asbestos are not exported to other countries, especially within the Third World, where legislation is less restrictive or even non-existent.