

Pleural plaques

Government gives green light to asbestos research

by Neil Hodge



Pleural plaques building up in the lungs of an asbestos victim

Although the Government has been criticised for its refusal to reverse the Law Lords' decision not to compensate people with pleural plaques, researchers and clinicians working to combat asbestos-related diseases have welcomed its announcement that the insurance industry will contribute £3 million towards the establishment of a new National Centre for Asbestos Related Diseases.

However, campaigners say the centre will need further funding if it is to sustain an effective research programme for years to come.

John Edwards, a consultant thoracic surgeon who chairs the NCARD group, said: "We are pleased that the Department of Justice has given its moral support to this initiative and that the Department of Health will support an increase in research investment. But as yet we have no firm financial commitment to address the nation's number one public health disaster.

"While we welcome compensation payments to victims, our patients are less interested in getting compensation than in getting their lives back. For that, we need to undertake urgent research into how asbestos-related cancers can be treated effectively.

"Asbestos-related diseases have been a silent epidemic but, as cases increase inexorably, the government will have to do more to counter asbestos-related diseases. It has a responsibility to help the victims."

NCARD will be established on models developed in Australia and the United States – where governments have provided ring-fenced funding for research into asbestos-related diseases. But while the government and opposition parties have given their verbal and moral support, NCARD has no public funding.

Mesothelioma, a cancer resulting from asbestos exposure, is increasing in incidence. It is the fastest increasing cancer in women and is among the fastest growing in men. The disease is invariably fatal, with an average survival of less than nine months. It is resistant to current treatments such as surgery, chemotherapy and radiotherapy and there is growing evidence that asbestos exposure contributes to the causation of other cancers including throat, bowel and ovarian cancers.

The Government has also announced it will create a UK-wide Employers' Liability Tracing Office. This will manage a database of insurance policies and operate the existing tracing service so people who develop asbestos-related diseases can trace the employer's insurer and help speed up their compensation claim.

The Government has also proposed setting up an Employers' Liability Insurance Bureau to provide a compensation fund of last resort for individuals throughout Britain who are unable to trace EL insurance records. ●

Workplace rights

New review of working time rules under way

by Kate Holman in Brussels

As the European Union launched yet another round of consultation over controversial European working time legislation, trade unions called for publication of a report on how the existing rules have been put into

practice in member states.

The European Trade Union Confederation says it needs to see the study, which has been "sitting in the European Commission's filing cabinets since 2008," in order to judge what changes are needed. Confederal Secretary Cateleone Passchier said: "We are demanding that this report be made available to the social partners immediately."

The ETUC has criticised the European Commission for failing to take action against member states it says are flouting the law.

The previous attempt to revise the hotly contested 1993 Working Time Directive foundered in early 2009, chiefly over the refusal by the British and a small number of other governments to abandon the national opt-out, allowing employees to agree to work more than the legal 48-hour week. The European Parliament has consistently rejected renewal of the opt-out. Last June, Socialist MEPs blocked moves to "recast" the directive without parliamentary approval while they were away campaigning for re-election. "The failure to reach an agreement does not mean the problems around the existing rules have gone away," said the EU's new Employment Commissioner László Andor. These include disagreement over the definition of "on call" time, following a series of legal rulings.

ETUC general secretary John Monks said: "There is a clear link between long and irregular working hours and increased work-related health problems. Although the world of work has changed, this evidence has not. Protection of the health and safety of workers must remain the primary goal." ●

Nuclear disarmament

CND hails new arms reduction treaty

by Keith Richmond

The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament has welcomed the new arms reduction treaty between the US and Russia as "a major step on the road towards a nuclear-free future".

CND chair Kate Hudson said: "After almost a year of negotiations, these significant cut backs are very welcome. World leaders must now build on this momentum to secure further rounds of cuts, bringing the other nuclear weapon states into the process."

Ms Hudson called on Britain to play its part, too. "Gordon Brown has said that 'as soon as it becomes useful for our arsenal to be included in a broader negotiation, Britain stands ready to participate and to act'. Now is that time. Were Britain to put Trident on the negotiating table at the NPT conference this could be a real game changer." ●