

DON'T MESS WITH ASBESTOS

Overseeing a refurbishment or new fitout? Asbestos can lurk where you'd least expect it as JOHN JARRATT writes.

The old Aussie attitude of 'she'll be right mate' doesn't cut it when it comes to asbestos. For far too long, people have ignored warnings about asbestos, most likely because there doesn't appear to be the same immediate danger as with electricity or other potential risks in properties when undertaking maintenance or refurbishments.

But, make no mistake, asbestos can be a killer. Every week 13 Australians die of asbestos-related diseases (12 from malignant mesothelioma). Another 13 are diagnosed with mesothelioma, an incurable cancer where the average survival time is just 10 to 12 months after diagnosis. So, while facility managers may have overlooked the warnings, it's time they faced up to the realities of dealing with asbestos.

Asbestos-containing material (or ACM) is any material or product that may contain asbestos. Although banned in the 1980s for use in commercial and non-residential properties, asbestos continued to be used in multiple locations up to 31 December 2003.

If undisturbed, well-maintained, in stable, sealed and good condition, asbestos and ACM is unlikely to pose health risks. The risks occur when ACM is disturbed, releasing microscopic fibres that can become airborne, settle on clothing, equipment or surfaces and can be inhaled. If inhaled, these fibres can lead to incurable diseases including mesothelioma, lung cancer and asbestosis.

Although there is no known safe level of exposure to asbestos fibres, what we do know is that the greater the exposure to fibres, the greater the risk of developing asbestos-related diseases. It's vital that facility managers ensure they know the risks and that they manage asbestos safely in line with regulations.

Basically, facility managers need to look out whenever ACM is damaged or broken, cut, drilled, sawn, sanded, scraped, waterblasted or disturbed during maintenance, demolition or refurbishment work. This is also the case when using tools



on ACM, particularly power tools that can release a high concentration of fibres.

There are strict requirements for the management, control and the removal of asbestos or ACM. While the overall responsibility for asbestos sits with the property owner, if they employ an agent or manager to manage the building, their representative must ensure that asbestos is managed in accordance with Work Health and Safety (WH&S) regulations and in conjunction with the asbestos Codes of Practice.

WHAT ARE ACMS AND WHERE ARE THEY FOUND?

One of the challenges for facility managers is not knowing the types of ACM to look for or being aware of the many areas where these products may be located on a property.

Asbestos was used in the manufacture of a broad range of building and decorator materials, which can be found in commercial properties, including:

- mechanical services (fire dampeners, attenuators, exhaust fans, HVAC ducts, gaskets, filters)
- fibre cement products and linings (AC sheeting, cladding, roofing, moulded cement products, linings, mastics, fire doors)
- electrical (switchboards, metre boards, fuses, circuit breakers)
- floor finishes (adhesives and backing of vinyl, lino, carpet or ceramic tiles, carpet underlay, mastics, concrete flooring)
- elevators, plumbing (pipes, lagging, sealants)
- textiles (ropes, fire blankets, cable sheathing, felts)
- sprayed insulation (fire proofing, thermal protection and sound proofing), and
- brake pads.

The first rule of managing asbestos safely is to assume its presence in any building constructed or refurbished prior to 2003. The second rule is to identify the various types of materials, their location and condition, which should be listed



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in an Asbestos Register created specifically for each building. Anyone who may be doing work on the property should have access to this register.

The most effective way to identify if asbestos is in a property is to engage a licensed asbestos assessor or an occupational hygienist to conduct an inspection and provide a detailed report or register. The report should list the types of ACMs found, the locations, condition, results of testing and any recommendations, including removal by a licensed removalist.

While in some states people are permitted to remove up to 10 square metres of ACM, it is recommended that facility managers engage licensed asbestos removalists to remove all asbestos from properties where practical. Licensed removalists are trained to remove ACM safely and in line with regulations, including disposing of asbestos waste at a landfill disposal site approved to accept asbestos waste.

When engaging a removalist, facility managers must ensure that any removalists hold the appropriate licence and supply a detailed Asbestos Removal Control Plan prior to commencing the job.

After completion, managers must also be supplied with a Clearance Certificate for the removal site and evidence (a receipt) that the asbestos waste has been transported and disposed of in accordance with state/territory regulations.

Another challenge for facility managers can be confusion regarding regulations and the required safe work procedures to

manage asbestos safely. For residential buildings, asbestos products don't need to be removed if they're sealed, in good, stable condition and undisturbed. However, the regulations for commercial properties are different in that all asbestos that has been identified should be removed (as is reasonably practicable) by a licensed asbestos removalist or encapsulated and identified with warning labels to prevent it from future disturbance.

To date, managing asbestos in commercial or non-residential properties may have seemed a complex task. With the recent launch of newly developed online resources at asbestosawareness.com.au, however, it's now easier for property owners, managers and contractors to manage asbestos in commercial properties safely and in line with regulations.

These resources provide practical guidance in the identification and correct management of ACMs to prevent disturbance of materials when work is being conducted, including maintenance, demolition or the refurbishment of commercial properties where ACM is suspected.

Resources include the *Asbestos Management Handbook for Commercial and Non-residential Properties*, a series of fact sheets and templates for developing Asbestos Registers, Asbestos Management Plans and the steps to take if asbestos is accidentally disturbed. There is also an extensive database of images of ACMs that were common in commercial properties to help managers identify the many various types of ACMs and their possible locations.

The take-home message for all managers of commercial properties is simple: don't mess with asbestos! Think Smart! Think Safe! Think asbestosawareness.com.au and download what you need to know to manage asbestos safely. ●

→ *John Jarratt is an ambassador for the National Asbestos Awareness Campaign.*