

Preface

Asia has long needed a coordinated approach to the problem of widespread asbestos use. While some countries in the region, such as Japan and Korea, have already instituted asbestos bans, others continue to manufacture and use asbestos products; in particular, India and China remain heavy users.

China's Minister of Health Chen Zhu recently warned decision-makers in Beijing that "Work-related disease has still not been controlled effectively." [1] According to a report in the China Daily on April 25, 2009:

"the Minister revealed that some illnesses, such as pneumoconiosis – the so-called black lung disease that affects many miners – are becoming more prevalent. And he said more respiratory diseases are being diagnosed in younger people than before.

The country's 250 million migrant workers, who mostly work in small- and medium-sized enterprises, often have not signed contracts, move frequently and are at high risk of contracting an occupational disease."

Advising experts and government officials that the incidence of occupational disease may be grossly underreported, Minister Zhu predicted that "the number of new cases of work-related illnesses will keep climbing" [2]. From the article, it appeared that the Minister's comments about pneumoconiosis related to injured miners, nevertheless, the journalist pointed out that "Pneumoconiosis is caused by long exposure to mineral or metallic dust and emergent poisoning at work." Asbestosis, a signature disease contracted by workers who mine, process or handle asbestos, is a form of pneumoconiosis. As China is the world's biggest user of asbestos and second biggest producer, there can be little doubt that the incidence of asbestosis, along with other types of pneumoconiosis, will rise there.

The Minister's statements taken in combination with the fact that the Chinese Government banned the use of asbestos in automotive friction materials (2003) and in building products for the construction of the 2008 Beijing Olympics indicate that not only is there a high level of official concern over asbestos but also that action is being taken to protect the population from hazardous exposures. The timing of Minister Chen Zhu's comments on the eve of the Asian Asbestos Conference 2009 – the first "grass-roots" asbestos conference in China – was indeed serendipitous.