



Massey study exposes workplace cancer risks

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Many New Zealanders are exposed at work to substances proven to cause cancer, a Massey University study has found, with hundreds dying each year.

Construction, heavy manufacturing, health services, agriculture and wood and paper processing were the worst-affected industries, the study showed.

Lead researcher Andrea 't Mannelje said the 50 common carcinogens in New Zealand workplaces included known hazards such as asbestos and formaldehyde but also wood dust, involuntary smoking and silica.

The National Occupational Health and Safety Advisory Committee estimates that 237 to 425 people die each year from occupational cancer in New Zealand.

"In New Zealand we don't really know what carcinogens would be the most important to tackle, in terms of prevention and in which industries, so this study tried to get a bit of a handle on that," Ms 't Mannelje said.

The 50 carcinogens exposed known specialist pesticides, but also commonly encountered substances such as diesel smoke and solar radiation.

"I think employees and employers need to be more aware of the real risks," she said. "For example, wood dust is common in the workplace and associated with respiratory problems, but people should know that it's also a known carcinogen."

A study of the wood furniture and joinery industry found 87 per cent of joinery workers and 67 per cent of wood furniture workers were exposed to inhalable wood dust levels well above international standards.

The review also led Ms 't Mannelje to believe that even shift work could be a potential cause of cancer affecting New Zealand women.

"It's currently classified as probably carcinogenic. It's associated with an increased risk of breast cancer, because of hormonal changes that occur."

However, she said that because the study showed only correlations between carcinogen exposure in the workplace and cancer rates, rather than causation, it was harder to predict when cancer might occur in employees.

"It can be 10 years, 20 years and even 30 years and often it is not traced back.

"The association only comes up when you compare cancer sufferers working in one industry to cancer sufferers in another."

The paper, from Massey's Centre of Public Health Research, cross-referenced worldwide studies on carcinogens with the latest labour statistics to find the largest exposure possibilities.

In the worldwide literature review, agriculture was identified as a leading example of an industry with high exposure to carcinogens, but, because of regulation, New Zealand farmers were not exposed to many of the worst pesticides.

The study found only suspected carcinogens in use on New Zealand farms.

Ms 't Mannelje said her work provided a good foundation for more specific industry studies and workplace health and safety reviews.

"Once you know you have the potential for exposure, you can do something about limiting that exposure," she said.

"This should be included in any full health and safety programme." Fairfax NZ

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