

Hon Amy Adams
Minister for the Environment



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Speech

Cancer Society Forum on workplace carcinogens

Te Papa, Wellington

Good morning.

Thank you Dalton for your introduction and thank you to the Cancer Society of New Zealand and the Centre for Public Health Research for hosting this important event and for inviting me to open your conference today.

I have no doubt today will be a valuable opportunity for you all to consider ways to better address workplace exposure to carcinogens.

Far too many New Zealanders die each year from work-related cancer.

While those cancers can be many and varied, including exposures to dusts and sun, the area of particular focus for me as Environment Minister, is the link between workplace cancer and the use of hazardous substances under the HSNO legislation.

The intersection between workplace health and safety and the use of hazardous substances is also an issue I've had a personal interest in for some time.

Not long after I became the Member of Parliament for Selwyn, I was visited by two of my constituents, Tony and Annette Gibson.

Tony and Annette shared with me the heart-breaking story of how they lost their 29 year old son, Jason, to cancer in 2003.

And what struck me the most was how fast it all happened.

One day after work, Jason went to his parents' home complaining of hayfever-like symptoms. The day before, he had had a bad nose bleed.

Knowing that his son had been dealing with lead paint at work, Tony sent his son to the doctor.

The doctor did some tests and the following day told Jason he had leukaemia.

Six days later, Jason was dead, leaving behind a wife and a three-year-old daughter.

Jason's cancer was eventually attributed to exposure to solvents at work over a prolonged period.

In response to Jason's death, Tony and Annette started a campaign to highlight the dangers of using solvents in the workplace and how people can protect themselves from exposure.

Through tireless work and the co-operation of the paint sector and others, Tony and Annette started the ‘Glove Up’ campaign, promoting a simple pictogram on paint and other hazardous products, warning people to protect themselves by wearing appropriate protective equipment.

Everyone understands, at some level, the consequences of not properly managing health and safety, particularly around hazardous substances.

The deadly explosion at a fertiliser plant in West Texas tragically reminded us why we must be ever-vigilant about workplace safety, particularly when hazardous substances are involved.

In New Zealand, the Tamahere cool store explosion and the Pike River disaster brought home the message that New Zealand is by no means immune to such tragedies.

We simply must do better at safeguarding our workers from harm.

But while those disasters make the headlines, many more of our workers face a far more insidious health threat from regular exposure to hazardous substances.

Cancers and other chronic health problems caused by exposure to hazardous substances all too often lead to disabilities and early death, as it's a slow, silent killer and the linkages just aren't prominent enough in the minds of New Zealanders.

While we don't have exact numbers, it is estimated that every year about 500-800 New Zealanders die from occupational illness, many of those as a result of exposure to hazardous substances.

We are talking about a figure that could well be more than double New Zealand's annual road toll.

Those deaths and disabilities are largely preventable with the right combination of education, enforcement and greater investment by industry in modernising safety systems.

It is the responsibility of all of us to ensure that workers are not only safe from harm at the end of each work day, but that their health is protected throughout their lifetimes.

As a Government we are committed to improving New Zealand's poor health and safety record.

The integration of HSNO and the new Health and Safety at Work Bill is a crucial part of in achieving this.

In the past HSNO has sometimes been considered a poor cousin to health and safety legislation.

The enforcement of HSNO controls and efforts to reduce chronic harm and exposure to carcinogens has often taken a back seat to the immediate dangers posed by other workplace risks.

The Government's reforms clearly signal that the safe management of hazardous substances and other workplace carcinogens is a vital part of a safe workplace.

You will hear soon from Professor Gregor Coster, the chair of the Work Safe Establishment Board, who will no doubt have much to say about the challenging and important role that Work Safe will play in creating safer workplaces.

We have given Professor Coster very clear messages about the focus we expect Worksafe New Zealand to have in addressing occupational health and workplace carcinogens.

It is absolutely crucial that we address the Kiwi "she'll be right" attitude that causes people to gamble with their health on a daily basis, and fail to take basic yet inexpensive precautions.

Most of us wouldn't dream of taking passengers without them wearing their safety belts. But how often do we take that proactive attitude into our workplaces or the places we visit as customers?

The Environmental Protection Authority recently conducted a study on workplace compliance with the safety requirements of hazardous substances.

They found that only 25 per cent of businesses surveyed complied with all eight critical controls that were examined.

Think about how often you walk past a work site or go into a workshop and see people without the basics - safety glasses, hearing protectors, masks or sun protection.

The practices we ignore become the safety standards we are willing to accept. There are cultural and training issues we need to address, and we all have roles to play as employers, colleagues and consumers.

The Health and Safety Taskforce Report indicated that our national culture includes a high level of tolerance for risk and negative perceptions of health and safety.

In my view, much of that has stemmed from years when OSH was seen as having an overly bureaucratic focus, with too much emphasis on paper cuts and ergonomic chairs, while serious issues like the death rates from work-related cancers remained too far under the radar.

Employers and workers alike need to be aware of the long and short term risks of workplace carcinogens and how to protect themselves from harm.

It is our job as Government and industry to work harder to get the message across.

My concern at the appalling statistics in this regard has driven me to launch a range of initiatives aimed at increasing HSNO compliance.

At the centre of these efforts is a three-year advertising campaign to raise public awareness about the harm caused by unsafe handling of hazardous substances.

The campaign's images compare hazardous substances to assault weapons, guns and grenades.

The images are confronting, intentionally so, but they get the message across. While the effects may not be immediate, these substances can kill just as easily as other deadly weapons if not used correctly.

The EPA has also developed a Hazardous Substances Toolbox to raise awareness among small and medium sized businesses about the risks of working with hazardous substances such as paints, solvents and liquid agrochemicals.

The toolbox includes:

- A guide to working safely with hazardous substances
- An online calculator that allows businesses to enter a list of their hazardous substances and learn what key controls they need in place
- Posters reminding workers about the health impacts of being exposed to hazardous substances and the meaning of chemical labels
- Five animated safety videos designed to convey key safety messages to staff; and
- An easy reference emergency response plan

To date, more than 6500 orders have been placed for the toolbox. In fact, demand has been so strong, a further 10,000 copies have been produced to meet demand.

I've received plenty of positive feedback about this initiative, including a letter from the manager of a small business telling me that the toolbox has made a significant difference in their health and safety culture.

Last year the EPA and the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment carried out a joint project targeting the collision repair sector.

As part of this project, the EPA developed a guidance document and health and safety poster which was distributed by MBIE on enforcement visits to collision repair businesses.

This is the sort of joined-up approach that the Government expects from agencies. Combining the EPA's technical expertise with MBIE's frontline role in workplaces has the potential to be applied to other sectors.

Other sectors that are now being targeted are boat building, metal finishing and coating, and building finishing activities using solvents, such as joinery, carpeting and painting.

An initiative to improve the use of personal protective equipment in the collision repair sector has also been developed between the EPA, the Collision Repair Association, paint suppliers, the Employers and Manufacturers Association, Responsible Care and MBIE.

The resulting Collision Repair Safety Pack has been distributed to those in the sector.

A second personal protective equipment initiative is being explored with the agricultural chemical sector.

This will include guidance information for users, improvements to training, labelling and the provision of personal protective equipment information at the point of sale.

Efforts to reduce harm are also supported by research into hazardous substances, such as the recent Massey University report on occupational cancer.

This research found that there are more than 50 known human carcinogens commonly present in New Zealand workplaces, and the report indicates that the EPA's work over the past several years in reassessing, removing and restricting many of the most dangerous substances is absolutely necessary.

I was pleased to see that the report confirmed that New Zealand farmers were not exposed to many of the worst pesticides available internationally.

Over the past few years the EPA has done a lot of work to reduce danger to farmers and agricultural workers, including requiring users of the more hazardous pesticides to be licensed and trained in how to use these substances safely. The EPA has also removed the approvals for a number of pesticides suspected to be carcinogenic.

Massey's research funded by the Health Research Council of New Zealand and MBIE, is an example of the Government and the research community working together towards successful interventions to keep New Zealanders safe.

I also want to acknowledge the research being undertaken by the Centre for Public Health Research, who you will hear from today.

To help us reduce occupational diseases from hazardous substances we need to know what is actually happening. While we understand acute incidents, chronic harm is much harder to measure.

The Centre for Public Health Research provides an important source of information – the Hazardous Substances Surveillance System.

It has also developed a Hazardous Substances Disease Injury Reporting Tool which contributes information.

The Hazardous Substances Surveillance System provides information about the distribution and characteristics of exposure to hazardous substances, as well as the morbidity and mortality experienced by workers and the general public, including children, as a result of exposure to hazardous substances.

Both the Ministry for the Environment and the Environmental Protection Authority use this information for monitoring, policy development, and compliance.

Diseases that medical professional suspects are caused by hazardous substances are able to be notified to the local Medical Officer of Health.

To help doctors capture this information, the Centre for Public Health Research has been implementing the Hazardous Substances Disease and Injury Reporting Tool over the last three years.

The Reporting Tool is an electronic form that links to practice management systems, making primary care notification of diseases and injuries caused by hazardous substances simple and quick.

The Reporting Tool is now available throughout New Zealand and I want to encourage the use of this resource. The information collected will make an important contribution to hazardous substances surveillance and public health action.

Events such as today's forum are an excellent opportunity to increase awareness of the harm caused by workplace carcinogens and to consider ways to reduce preventable deaths caused by occupational cancer.

The Government is committed to achieving results but cannot do it alone - we all have a stake in the health of our workforce.

It now gives me great pleasure to formally open your forum and wish you a successful day of fruitful discussions.

