

Asbestos

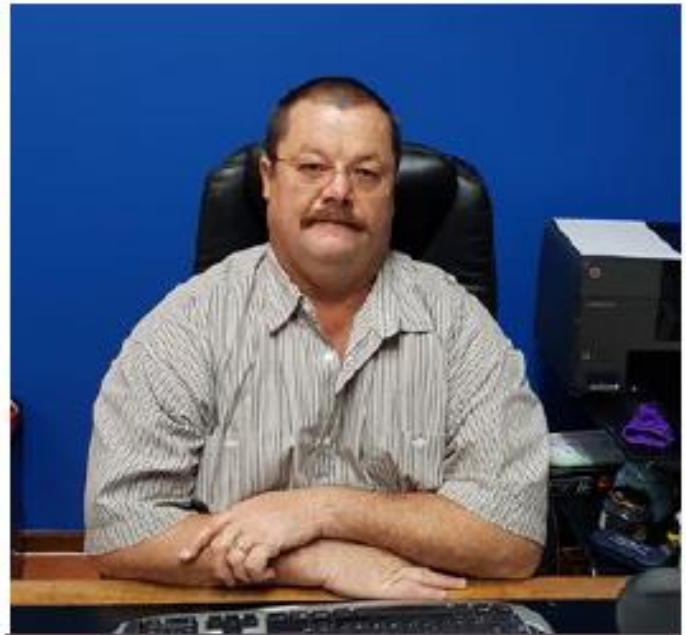
Pandemics manifest in various ways, impacting all of us and leaving behind pain, suffering and disbelief. Not only is the coronavirus on the rampage, but Britain has in the past year experienced more than 2 000 asbestos-related deaths especially in construction related industries.

For many years, asbestos was used in almost every public and commercial building constructed before the 1980s across all continents. As a fireproofing material, it was applied on steel beams and columns during the construction of multi-storey buildings. Due to its strength, asbestos was added to concrete, asphalt, vinyl materials, roof shingles, pipes, siding, wall board, floor tiles, joint compounds and adhesives. Its heat-resistant qualities made asbestos the perfect thermal insulation material. The material was also used in acoustical plaster and as a component of a mixture sprayed on ceilings and walls. In short, it was the miracle material of the building industry.

Asbestos only becomes a hazard when it is not kept in a well-maintained state and exposed to weather conditions, or mistakenly damaged by renovators, installers, electricians, plumbers, etc. This poses a health risk to building occupants, employees, and maintenance workers due to the fine invisible fibres released into the air. If inhaled, it can penetrate into the deep gas exchange areas of the lungs. As a result of its characteristic properties, these almost chemically inert, aerodynamic and lightweight fibres cannot be removed from the lungs resulting in chronic illness and adverse, irreversible health effects. The risk is even greater, if the building is demolished, renovated, remodelled without adequate control measures in place. Repeated exposure to asbestos increases the risk of developing asbestos-related diseases with a cumulative effect.

In the Republic of South Africa, the Zondo Commission have recently untangled the corruption surrounding Asbestos in the Free State Province where a useful Asbestos Management tool was used to swindle millions out of taxpayers' pockets. The occupants are still no closer to being rid of the silent killer in their houses.

Master Builders Association North (MBA North) facilitated various discussions and workshops with regards to the impact of the Asbestos Abatement Regulation in the construction industry. The new Asbestos Abatement Regulation has finally been signed in Parliament and is underway to the Government printers. These regulations give guidance to all employers on the safe work



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management of asbestos, asbestos-containing materials and the recommended steps which need to be taken by the asbestos owner or persons employing individuals to work on asbestos.

For the first time, the Abatement Regulation calls for the owner of a building to have a document declaring that the building is free of asbestos. If asbestos is identified in the building, an Asbestos Management Plan and a Phase-out Plan for any asbestos on site is required. Banking and insurance industry are more knowledgeable on financing buildings containing asbestos owing to containing poorly maintained buildings which may be damaged extensively during heavy storms which may require repairs and pay-outs.

Before the commencement of maintenance, refurbishment, demolition of pre-existing structures or excavations where asbestos pipes / materials are found underground, the risk of potential exposure should be known and included in the management and or project plan. All hazardous chemical substances identified on the site should be removed before the dismantling and or demolition of structures is started. This asbestos work should be performed by a registered asbestos contractor and all waste which potentially contain asbestos, must be disposed of on a high hazardous (HH) waste facility. The originator of such waste must retain a safe disposal certificate as proof thereof.

The Asbestos Abatement Regulation now also bans the use of high-pressure water jetting to clean asbestos containing materials as this may contribute to the release of debris which can lead to airborne asbestos fibres.

With the introduction of a new Regulation, the Chief Inspector of the Department of Employment and Labour pledged that the 500 newly appointed inspectors will be more proactive in enforcing the Occupational Health and Safety Act and its Regulations which includes the Asbestos Abatement Regulation. ■

