

Asbestos in the entertainment industry and compensation

The BBC has become the latest high profile company or corporation to be ordered to pay damages to people who have suffered the ill effects of asbestos because of working for them. The corporation has been ordered to pay 1.64 million pounds in damages over the deaths of eleven former staff who died from cancer after working in corporation buildings that were said to be riddled with asbestos.

Mesothelioma was common in the arts

Over the years, we have heard many horror stories about how asbestos was not only present, but also was also actively used in the production of television and film.

We now know that pure asbestos flakes were routinely used to imitate snow on the sets of the films White Christmas and the Wizard of Oz, with Judy Garlands character Dorothy, literally being covered in it from head to toe.

It is hardly surprising that many years ago; asbestos was routinely used in the arts. After all, asbestos is a very versatile natural material. Asbestos is a fantastic insulator against heat, fire and sound, as well as making a realistic substitute for snow.

The corporation has made the financial settlements to families of make-up artists, engineers, riggers, set builders, studio managers and television producers who had worked on BBC sets over the years and been diagnosed with mesothelioma. It should be noted that mesothelioma is a rare cancer caused by prolonged exposure to asbestos. Mesotheliomas related to asbestos exposure take a very long time to develop. The time between the first asbestos exposure and diagnosis of mesothelioma is usually between 20 and 50 years. In addition, the risk of mesothelioma does not go down over time after the exposure to asbestos stops. The risk appears to be lifelong.

Sadly, all eleven former BBC employees died of mesothelioma.

All the eleven deceased worked at a number of BBC locations, including Broadcasting House in central London, Pebble Mill studios in Birmingham and Television Centre in White City, west London, the latter being BBC headquarters for many years until 2013.

The BBC premises also includes Bush House, the former base of BBC World Service radio, and Alexandra Palace, both in the capital. Alexandra Palace, also affectionately referred to as Ally Pally, has become known as the 'the birthplace of television', because the BBC made its historic, ground breaking first television broadcast from there way back in 1936.

Freedom of information requests unearth more cases

The number of mesothelioma cases became known after the broadcasting corporation responded to a freedom of information request by a mainstream newspaper. The newspaper wanted details of settled cases after revealing the previous year that the BBC was facing potential claims from relatives of former members of the BBC Symphony Orchestra and other former personnel who worked in premises containing asbestos.

The BBC has stated that it had paid £1,637,501 in compensation over the last ten years to settle claims involving the nine men and two women, who worked for the corporation between 1959 and 1998. The identities of the victims were not disclosed at the time of the freedom of information requests.

The threat of asbestos still lurks around us

Many read stories such as the above with utter disbelief, because many know that asbestos has been outlawed in the United Kingdom since 1999. In fact, the importation, supply and use of all asbestos has been banned in the UK since this date; with the amphibole type being banned since 1985.

Amphibole is a group of inosilicate minerals, forming prism or needle like crystals. Four of the amphibole minerals are among the minerals commonly called asbestos. These are anthophyllite, riebeckite, the cummingtonite/grunerite series, and the actinolite/tremolite series. The cummingtonite/grunerite series is often termed amosite or 'brown asbestos', and riebeckite is known as crocidolite or 'blue asbestos'. These are generally called amphibole asbestos. Mining, manufacture and prolonged use of these minerals can cause very serious illnesses such as mesothelioma.

According to the charity Mesothelioma UK, 95% of hospitals and 85% of schools in the United Kingdom still contain some asbestos. This is a very worrying statistic, as we know that asbestos is a carcinogenic substance that causes mesothelioma. On the plus side, should the asbestos be exposed, or in a position that could easily become exposed or damaged, the likelihood of it being removed is quite high.

Over half of people diagnosed with mesothelioma die within a year of their diagnoses. It is also worrying that around 2,700 people a year in the United Kingdom are diagnosed with mesothelioma. Of course it should be remembered that with such a long period of time from exposure to diagnoses, we may be seeing people who were exposed up to half a century ago presenting with the disease.

The BBC did state that it was not possible to confirm whether the individual victims were exposed to asbestos while working at BBC locations and, if so, over what period that exposure may have occurred. Should freelance workers be among the victims, then it is highly possible that they could have been exposed to this deadly mineral at work locations other than the BBC premises. However, when one looks at the roles the victims played at the BBC, it could be argued that they are possibly long-term employees.

Asbestos warnings following the UK ban

Only seven years after the 1999 ban, the BBC are reported to have warned current and former employees and freelancers that they had been exposed to asbestos in studios TC2, TC3 and TC5 at the now disused Television Centre between 1990 and

2005. It is believed that asbestos fibres had fallen from cable ducting on to the floors below, potentially giving rise to human exposure.

The BBC admitted liability for the death from mesothelioma of a horn player with the BBC Symphony Orchestra. The victim's inquest found that he died from the consequences of exposure to asbestos. He rehearsed for 36 years at BBC studios in Maida Vale, London, which were later found to contain asbestos; some of the present asbestos was broken and exposed.

Another former BBC employee who died from mesothelioma had spent over twenty-three years building and painting sets for the BBC at several BBC buildings, but worked mostly at Television Centre, where he used the textured ceiling finish known as Artex. Until as late as the middle of the 1980's, Artex was manufactured with white asbestos. The victim had apparently worked on well-known show sets including Doctor Who.

Are we seeing the tip of the asbestos iceberg?

Many who have worked at the BBC and many other places that contained asbestos have stated that they suspect many more BBC personnel and other such employees had been exposed to asbestos than those in the eleven settled lawsuits.

So it really does beg the question, if the corporation have made settlements to eleven individuals, how many more cases are out there waiting to develop symptoms following exposure?

When you consider how many people had access to these premises over the years, the potential number of victims could literally run into the tens of thousands.

The asbestos death toll: will it get higher?

Many asbestos consultants agree that a good deal of public buildings including schools, council offices and police stations of a certain age still contain amosite, also known as brown asbestos, and pose a clear and present danger to anyone who uses the buildings. The fact that many schools still have the asbestos present is a particular worry, as children may not adhere to careful and safe practices around encapsulated boards and wall coverings. In other environments that are correctly managed, the danger remains low assuming any asbestos that is present is correctly encapsulated.

Brown amosite asbestos is the form of asbestos found in the lungs of 98% of people who develop mesothelioma. Amosite is clearly lethal, yet it remains present in so many public buildings.

Again, we must always keep in mind the time lag between the initial exposure to the deadly mineral fibres and the onset of symptoms and an official, medical diagnosis. Therefore, the number of cases of mesothelioma and other asbestos related issues could get higher and persist for many years to come.

Why asbestos was used so much in entertainment?

The truth of the matter is that asbestos was not only used in the entertainment industry, but everywhere. Lagging on ships, insulating board in schools and colleges and even coalbunkers in domestic gardens.

Asbestos was used in entertainment so often was because sets for television and film were being built and demolished on a regular basis. Unfortunately, if asbestos

were to be used in the initial build of a set, the workers and people around the set would get a triple helping of the danger when the set was in use and when it was broken down when filming had finished.

The action is the latest in a growing number of lawsuits the BBC is facing from relatives of ex-employees who died of mesothelioma they contracted after exposure to asbestos in several of the corporation's premises.

No excuses about the dangers of asbestos

One could perhaps be more forgiving over its use when few people knew of the dangers of asbestos. However, following the outright ban in the United Kingdom, anyone responsible for any building should have known about the potential risk from any asbestos that may be present in those premises.

To say you were not aware is a rather lame excuse as the coverage in the media about the dangers were quite extensive at the time.

The corporation should have had a robust asbestos management plan firmly in place to manage any premises where asbestos was present. Clearly, should the asbestos be out of the way and in a good state of repair, encapsulation may be all that is required to keep people safe. Should asbestos be present in a high occupancy area and be in a poor state of repair, then removal by an approved asbestos expert should have been ordered as soon as practicable.

As part of any asbestos management plan, your workers need to be made aware of the asbestos and steps to take should any suspicion of damage arise. To simply be left to work with asbestos without any prior knowledge of its existence and without so much as a facemask appears indefensible.

Is asbestos here to stay?

Until we can have every fibre removed from every building, we will have ongoing issues with asbestos in and around our communities.

Asbestos was once hailed as a miracle product owing to its fire retardant and insulating properties, now we know better!

We must all accept that the complete and total eradication of asbestos is simply unrealistic, but we must learn to live with it, effectively managing the risks involved, and ensuring everyone is sufficiently educated as to the dangers of this deadly mineral.

Hashtags: #Asbestos #EntertainmentIndustry #AsbestosCompensation