

Save Our Brisbane Suburbs

Part of the Australia wide Save Our Suburbs network

Factsheet #7

Asbestos ... a health and environmental problem ... but ignored?

SOBS Factsheet #6 raised the question of whether asbestos cement products being smashed to pieces during demolition posed a health problem. It also provides information about the problem. This Factsheet raises extremely serious concerns and issues as to the effectiveness of the emergency response mechanisms. As the issue has developed, the reliability if not responsibility of the various agencies that might be expected to control the serious long term health threats and impacts of demolition of asbestos cement products, is shown to be ineffective.

Members of the community appear to assume certain authorities are responsible for matters such as protection of the environment and control of health impacts of certain work. The responses from these authorities suggest that asbestos cement products pose little if any risk to people's health. Not only that but the response mechanisms suggest that the building industry can continue some practices with limited if any control. However this raises another set of issues as to why anyone who wants to remove their existing asbestos cement roof for example, faces very high costs for the process, yet demolishers seem able to simply and quickly smash the same material.

The story starts at 7am on Wednesday January 20, 2002, when a heavy tracked excavator began demolishing a house located on the corner of Graham Street and Harts Road Indooroopilly, and exposed corrugated asbestos cement roof material that was then smashed as part of the demolition process. This fact was reported to the BCC, EPA, Workplace Health and Safety (WH+S) after hours and/or emergency numbers soon after 7.30am. At that stage the expectation was that these authorities had the ability to respond, and quickly. They did not!

Everybody knows that asbestos is potentially dangerous ... and nobody wants to be exposed to it. So as the demolition proceeded and no authorities responded, the issue changed from stopping any exposure to asbestos to providing assurances that the adjoining houses and especially those with young children, were safe. Still nobody came to address either of these issues!

Some days later, it now seems that these emergency response numbers and call centres did not "respond" quickly to those calls but to later calls including to local and state politicians. Is this the case and if so why? If not, then why did it take so long for the responses?

It is now emerging that the BCC including the Lord Mayor's office redirected callers to the EPA and/or WH+S. Yet BCC would appear to be responsible for building approvals and permits for works such as demolition. Does BCC have any responsibility for approving and controlling demolition? If not, why not and who does? What conditions are included in the permits?

It is now emerging that the EPA has no responsibility for asbestos cement being handled on a building site if the work is done by other than the owner. If by the owner, extremely onerous requirements exist but if by a contractor, none! It is only when the material is to leave the property that EPA has a responsibility for transport and disposal but not demolition and therefore, not airborne or waterborne asbestos fibres including in dust. But who is responsible for the potentially lethal impacts of airborne asbestos fibres from a contractor smashing asbestos cement products? Who is responsible for protecting the environmental health of the adjacent neighbours, their young children and those at a nearby school? The Environmental Protection Agency? Apparently not.

If the work is done by other than the owner, it is now emerging that the only protection available is from WH+S ... and who then is responsible? The owner, the developer, the contractor? It seems that BCC and EPA assume WH+S is responsible and will respond. It did not. In fact, the first calls were made around 7.30am yet it seems no inspector arrived until after the roof demolition was completed. So the complaint was never able to be addressed. Why not?

In fact, WH+S made no contact with at least one of the complainants yet supposedly an investigation was carried out. As the response time was so poor, surely witnesses and complainant statements would allow a prosecution, a serious deterrent? Again, if not, why not? It seems that the building industry knows that starting such work at 7am means little if any risk of prosecution with at worst an “on the spot” fine.

It increasingly appears that grounds for a prosecution may not exist and that people, including the construction industry, effectively have a choice as to whether or not to voluntarily comply with asbestos product handling procedures. If so, why ... if asbestos is so dangerous?

It seems more attention is given to a fish kill or water pollution event in a small creek somewhere than to the long term emotional and health impacts of events such as this highly dangerous and emotive event involving asbestos threat to humans. Do authorities believe asbestos is not a problem? If so, why did they not provide a “clearance” that the neighbouring house was safe from asbestos when requested? Why did they not provide tests to verify the content of dust fallout?

By next afternoon, WH+S appeared to be attempting to defuse the situation by stating on radio that, contrary to comments that nothing was done, WH+S inspectors had been to the site five times. In fact, as nobody contacted the complainants or at least some of them, that cannot be challenged but is irrelevant to the two main issues.

The first issue involves questions as to when the first of those inspections was carried out, what was the state of the demolition, what evidence was gathered and recorded and importantly, why were the complainants not interviewed as witnesses? Once the process of “muddying the waters” begins, it seems there are still more questions to be answered. People living in this area know how expensive it is to remove asbestos products “properly” and what should be involved in so doing.

The second issue involves questions as to the responsibilities of BCC, EPA and WH+S. What coordination if any is there between these agencies which at face value appear to be responsible for permits, contaminated property etc? Which agency tests to ensure compliance is achieved including for the benefit of neighbours subject to possible exposure and when?

It seems unacceptable that neighbours should be expected to report possible breaches, then watch as work proceeds while knowing the threats and potential risks, and then, without assistance, make highly emotional decisions as to the extent of potential exposure and risk while the development process is allowed to continue with minimal control and minimal cost.

Should contractors or owners be required to prevent impacts on adjoining neighbours or are they allowed to carry out works which impact on adjoining neighbours? Should adjoining neighbours be expected to arrange and pay for emotional and health advice as well as for any remediation whether it is hosing down the dust (which puts the asbestos in the ground or the watercourses) or other forms of cleaning? Shouldn't the cost of these impacts be at the cost of those undertaking the demolition or building work? Should such impacts be prevented? The agencies by assuming that no exposure has occurred ignore the health threat yet will not issue a “clearance”. Why not?

This project has made explicit many concerns that are still unravelling. It seems clear at this stage that asbestos is a major health and environmental problem ... one that is being ignored by the agencies and authorities yet one that community members expect them to prevent or control.