

For information on
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Legislative Council Panel on Manpower

A Review of Occupational Diseases in Hong Kong in 2007

PURPOSE

This paper sets out the situation of occupational diseases in Hong Kong in 2007, and recent initiatives of the Occupational Health Service (OHS) of the Labour Department (LD) in promoting occupational health.

BACKGROUND

2. In Hong Kong, the Employees' Compensation Ordinance (Cap. 282), the Occupational Deafness (Compensation) Ordinance (Cap. 469) and the Pneumoconiosis (Compensation) Ordinance (Cap. 360) prescribe altogether 51 occupational diseases. Section 36(1) of the Employees' Compensation Ordinance also enables the claim of compensation where a disease is not prescribed in these Ordinances but can be proved in individual cases to be a personal injury by accident arising out of and in the course of employment.

3. In addition, all the 51 occupational diseases are also specified in Schedule 2 of the Occupational Safety and Health Ordinance (Cap. 509) as notifiable occupational diseases. Medical practitioners are required to notify the Commissioner for Labour cases of these occupational diseases.

CONFIRMED OCCUPATIONAL DISEASES IN 2007

4. In 2007, there were 177 cases of confirmed occupational disease, compared with 264 in 2006. The incidence rate in 2007 was 6.8 cases per 100 000 employed workers, compared with 10.5 in 2006. In the ten years between 1998 and 2007, there were also a significant drop in the number of cases and incidence rate by 81% and 83% respectively. The most common occupational diseases confirmed in 2007 were silicosis, occupational deafness, tenosynovitis of hand or forearm and tuberculosis. Relevant figures are set out at Annex.

Silicosis

5. Silicosis is a chronic disease with fibrosis of the lungs which may lead to impaired lung functions. Its latent period could be as long as 10 to 20 years. All cases are caused by exposure to silica dust many years ago. In 2007, there were 67 confirmed cases, compared with 109 in 2006. Most of these cases involved construction workers, many of whom had previously been exposed to extremely high levels of silica dust in hand-dug caisson work.

6. The Buildings Department has since 1995 introduced restrictions on the use of hand-dug caisson. These restrictions would have a significant impact on the prevention of silicosis in the longer term. In fact, the number of confirmed silicosis cases has generally been on a declining trend in the past decade, in spite of a rise in 2006.

Occupational Deafness

7. Occupational deafness is a permanent hearing loss owing to prolonged exposure to loud noise at work. In 2007, there were 47 diagnosed cases with compensation paid, compared with 51 in 2006. Most of these cases involved work in rock grinding, chiselling, cutting or percussion and metal grinding or percussion as well as working near internal combustion engines, turbines, pressurised fuel burners or jet engines.

Tenosynovitis of Hand or Forearm

8. Tenosynovitis is a traumatic inflammatory disease of tendons and the associated tendon sheath caused by prolonged and repetitive movements or excessive exertion of the hands and forearms. In 2007, there were 35 confirmed cases, compared with 63 in 2006. The disease was common among cleaners, general labourers, catering workers as well as clerical and other office personnel.

Tuberculosis

9. Tuberculosis is a prescribed occupational disease for workers having close and frequent contacts with a source of the infection by reason of their employment, such as those employed in the medical treatment or nursing of persons suffering from the disease. In 2007, there were 16 confirmed cases, compared with 18 in 2006. One of these cases involved a doctor and the others nurses. As the endemicity of tuberculosis in Hong Kong is still high, it is expected that occupation-related cases will continue to occur. Nevertheless, health care institutions have been taking stringent infection control measures to prevent the spread of the disease in the workplace.

Other Diseases

10. The other confirmed occupational diseases in 2007 included 7 cases of occupational dermatitis and 2 cases of asbestosis, accounting for 5% of all cases.

RECENT INITIATIVES OF OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE

Clinical Services

11. The two Occupational Health Clinics of LD provide clinical occupational health services for workers in Hong Kong. To meet the demand for such clinical services, LD set up in 2006 a second clinic to strengthen its services in the New Territories. This increased the number of consultations from 9 395 in 2005 to 13 098 in 2007.

Enforcement Campaigns

12. In 2007, the OHS conducted 265 inspections at establishments where workers worked with computers for prolonged periods of time, issuing 69 warning letters and 13 improvement notices. Having regard to the high health risk associated with drainage works, the OHS also conducted a targeted campaign to promote prevention of gas poisoning for drainage workers. A total of 619 inspections had been conducted with 46 warning letters and four improvement notices issued, and two prosecutions taken.

13. In 2008, the OHS will conduct a targeted campaign on health risks in industrial establishments where chemical and ergonomic hazards (e.g. noise, lighting, temperature and manual handling) are common to ensure that the workers are adequately safeguarded from these hazards. In the inspections to these establishments, the OHS will make in-depth assessments on different health hazards and review the adequacy and effectiveness of the control measures in place. Enforcement actions will be taken, as appropriate.

Occupational Health Promotion

14. The OHS has recently prepared a series of booklets on safety and health at work in relation to common diseases affecting the working population, such as diabetes and hypertension. To complement the enforcement campaign on prevention of gas poisoning for drainage workers, the OHS published two guidebooks to introduce appropriate preventive

measures to contractors and workers, and organised publicity and promotional activities such as television and radio promotion, showing educational videos on mobile advertising media, and organising occupational health talks for drainage contractors and workers. The OHS also organised a total of 1 464 health talks in 2007 on various occupational health issues for over 47 800 participants.

15. In 2008, the OHS will produce an educational kit to introduce different measures for preventing occupational diseases, and introduce the proper setting up of a workstation. The OHS will also publish a guidebook on assessment of lighting levels in the work environment and a guide on shift-work arrangements. As workers with musculoskeletal disorders constitute over 80% of all patients seeking consultations from the Occupational Health Clinics, the OHS will continue to promote the prevention of this health problem.

WAY FORWARD

16. LD will continue to actively promote prevention of occupational diseases and enhance the awareness of employers and employees on occupational health through law enforcement, education, and publicity and promotion.

Labour Department
March 2008

**Occupational Diseases Confirmed in Hong Kong
from 1998 to 2007**

Occupational disease	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Silicosis	104	137	105	122	110	74	69	68	109	67
Occupational deafness	631	388	206	121	114	74	52	60	51	47
Tenosynovitis of hand or forearm	71	54	81	90	35	34	43	75	63	35
Tuberculosis	39	57	39	41	29	30	42	30	18	16
Occupational dermatitis	34	21	17	24	29	10	7	10	8	7
Asbestosis	5	15	11	9	9	6	4	2	7	2
Gas poisoning	57	57	36	11	30	26	28	4	5	1
Compressed air illness	3	3	6	11	4	2	0	1	1	0
Others	4	2	3	1	4	2	6	6	2	2
Total :	948	734	504	430	364	258	251	256	264	177
Incidence rate (per 100 000 employed workers) :	39.7	30.4	20.1	17.1	14.8	10.9	10.3	10.3	10.5	6.8