

For discussion on
12 April 2012

Legislative Council Panel on Manpower

A Review of Occupational Diseases in Hong Kong in 2011

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on the situation of occupational diseases in Hong Kong in 2011 and the recent initiatives of the Labour Department (LD) in promoting occupational health and enforcing relevant occupational safety and health laws.

Background

2. According to the International Labour Organization, occupational diseases are diseases having specific or strong relationship with occupations, generally with only one causal agent. By making reference to the foregoing criteria and having regard to the local situation, LD from time to time updates the list of occupational diseases prescribed in the Employees' Compensation Ordinance ("ECO"), Occupational Deafness (Compensation) Ordinance ("ODCO") and Pneumoconiosis and Mesothelioma (Compensation) Ordinance ("PMCO"), and extends the coverage of some occupational diseases. The current legislation prescribes a total of 52 occupational diseases. LD has produced guides and guidance notes to explain the occupational diseases to the public and registered medical practitioners respectively.

3. The ECO provides that employees may claim compensation for a disease that is not prescribed in the Ordinance but can be proved in individual cases to be a personal injury by accident arising out of and in the course of employment.

Confirmed Occupational Diseases in 2011

4. In 2011, the number of confirmed cases of occupational diseases was 353, with about 50% increase when compared with 229 cases in 2010. The increase was mainly from occupational deafness cases. Other common occupational diseases included tenosynovitis of the hand or forearm and silicosis. The details are set out in paragraphs 5 to 10 below and relevant statistics are set out in the **Annex**.

Occupational Deafness

5. Occupational deafness is a permanent hearing loss arising from at least 5 to 10 years of exposure to high noise level at work in certain specified occupations. Most of these cases were related to rock grinding, chiselling, cutting or percussion, metal grinding, and working in close proximity to internal combustion engines, turbines, pressurised fuel burners or jet engines. In 2011, 157 cases were diagnosed as occupational deafness, while there were only 70 such cases in 2010. LD amended the ODCO in April 2010 to extend the coverage of compensation to employees suffering from monaural hearing loss and those who have been compensated but their hearing loss has worsened. Subsequently, the compensation claims received by the Occupational Deafness Compensation Board in 2011 increased substantially. In order to increase employers' and employees' awareness of occupational deafness, LD has been collaborating with the Board and other relevant organisations to promote practical measures for hearing conservation in workplaces.

Tenosynovitis of the Hand or Forearm

6. The ECO has prescribed 6 musculoskeletal diseases (including tenosynovitis of the hand or forearm) as occupational diseases, because epidemiological evidence reveals that these diseases are significantly related to specific occupations, such as prolonged repetitive actions or excessive force exerted by the hand or forearm resulting in traumatic inflammation of tendons and tendon sheaths. In 2011, there were 70 confirmed cases. Employees involved included sales workers, clerical support workers and cleansing service workers.

Silicosis

7. Silicosis is a chronic disease with fibrosis of the lungs owing to inhalation of silica dust. Its latent period could be as long as 10 to 20 years. Therefore, all cases are caused by exposure to silica dust many years ago. Most sufferers were construction workers, some of whom had been engaged in high-risk hand-dug caisson work. The number of confirmed cases was 63 in 2011.

Mesothelioma

8. Mesothelioma is a cancer of the lining of the chest wall caused by inhalation of asbestos, with a latent period as long as 30 to 40 years. This type of cancer was prescribed as an occupational disease under the PMCO in April 2008. In 2011, there were 13 confirmed cases.

Tuberculosis

9. In 2011, there were 17 confirmed cases of tuberculosis in workers having close and frequent contacts with a source of infection by reason of their employment (such as those employed in the medical treatment or nursing of persons suffering from the disease). Employees involved included nurses, other personal care workers and medical practitioners.

Other Diseases

10. The other occupational diseases confirmed in 2011 included 9 cases of asbestosis, 7 cases of occupational dermatitis, 3 cases of compressed air illness, 1 case of Streptococcus suis infection, 1 case of Leptospirosis, and 1 case of Avian chlamydiosis.

Initiatives of Labour Department on Promoting Improvement of Occupational Health

11. LD safeguards occupational safety and health of the working population by adopting the three-pronged strategy of legislation and enforcement, publicity and promotion, as well as education and training. To ensure that occupational health requirements under the Factories and Industrial Undertakings Ordinance and Occupational Safety and Health Ordinance are complied with, LD staff conduct surprise inspections to different workplaces regularly and take enforcement actions against irregularities identified.

Prevention of Occupational and Work-related Diseases

12. LD promotes employers' and employees' awareness of the prevention of occupational and work-related diseases by organising health talks and seminars, distributing educational publications, broadcasting Announcements in the Public Interest on television and the radio, publishing feature articles in newspapers, conducting promotional visits to workplaces, and showing educational videos on mobile advertising media. Apart from public talks, LD also organises outreaching health talks at the workplaces of individual organisations. In 2011, a total of 1 272 occupational health talks on various issues were organised with over 38 000 participants. Examples of the health talks included "Strategies for the Prevention of Occupational Diseases", "Manual Handling Operations and Prevention of Back Injuries", "Occupational Health for Cleansing Workers", "Prevention of Musculoskeletal Disorders for Office Workers", "Prevention of Lower Limb Disorders" and "Occupational Health in Catering Industry".

13. We partner with relevant organisations, including the Occupational Safety and Health Council (“OSHC”), Pneumoconiosis Compensation Fund Board, Occupational Deafness Compensation Board, employers’ associations, workers’ unions and community groups, in promoting occupational health through a variety of activities such as health talks, carnivals, occupational health award presentations and experience-sharing sessions, as well as workplace hygiene charter. In 2011, we collaborated with the OSHC, employers’ associations and trade unions of the retail and catering industries to promote measures for preventing diseases like varicose veins and plantar fasciitis among workers of the two industries. The publicity activities included showing promotional videos on mobile advertising media, paying promotional visits to retail stores and restaurants by occupational safety and health ambassadors, distributing educational pamphlets and promotional souvenirs, and inviting the Hong Kong Podiatrists Association and Physical Fitness Association of Hong Kong to design a set of workplace exercises specifically for workers of the two industries, which was promoted through seminars and exercise workshops.

14. Work-related musculoskeletal disorders are common among clerical personnel, service personnel and manual workers. We have been promoting the prevention of these disorders among office personnel, catering workers and transport workers at the airport through various channels. In 2011, we organised 9 health talks jointly with the Hong Kong Airport Authority and various ground handling service operators, covering such topics as risk assessments for manual handling operations, back care and simple stretching exercises at workplaces. Besides, we conducted in 2011 a total of 342 inspections to offices, catering workplaces, as well as work sites for loading and unloading operations in the airport, in which 75 warnings and 2 improvement notices were issued in relation to irregularities in musculoskeletal disorder prevention.

15. In 2012, we will collaborate with the OSHC, Department of Health and relevant workers’ unions to enhance the publicity on healthy lifestyle among professional drivers to raise their awareness of occupational health.

Prevention of Heat Stroke at Work

16. On the prevention of heat stroke at work, we collaborated with the OSHC, Construction Industry Council, and relevant employers’ associations and workers’ unions to launch a series of focused publicity and educational activities between April and September 2011, targeting workplaces with a higher risk of heat stroke (e.g. construction sites, outdoor cleansing workplaces, container yards, etc.) to enhance the awareness of employers and employees on prevention

of heat stroke at work. These activities included distributing relevant guidelines and risk assessment checklists, organising health talks, issuing press releases in response to weather conditions, publishing feature articles or broadcasting publicity videos and radio Announcements in the Public Interest through various media channels, and conducting promotional visits to workplaces (e.g. construction sites and outdoor cleansing workplaces). In 2011, we also collaborated with the OSHC and relevant workers' unions to promote occupational safety and health messages among professional drivers, including the prevention of heat stroke at work.

17. During the summer of 2011, LD conducted 28 900 inspections targeting workplaces with a higher risk of heat stroke, with 437 warnings and 14 improvement notices issued and 7 prosecutions taken out. Among these prosecutions, 6 were related to failure of the contractors / employers to provide potable water for their employees, and one was related to failure of the employer to provide a system of work for the prevention of heat stroke.

18. In 2012, apart from the enforcement actions during the summer, we will also partner with the OSHC, relevant trade unions and workers' unions to continue to promote the prevention of heat stroke at work among the employees of high risk industries, including construction workers, outdoor cleansing workers and professional drivers. The activities will include outreaching promotional activities and distribution of souvenir items for heat stroke prevention (chilling scarves, towels, electrolyte candies and water bottles).

Way Forward

19. LD will continue to actively promote the prevention of occupational and work-related diseases to enhance the awareness of employers and employees on occupational health, and to ensure that employers comply with the occupational safety and health legislation through law enforcement.

Labour and Welfare Bureau
Labour Department
April 2012

Occupational Diseases Confirmed in Hong Kong from 2002 to 2011

Occupational disease	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Occupational deafness*	114	74	52	60	51	47	58	77	70	157
Tenosynovitis of the hand or forearm	35	34	43	75	63	35	40	39	48	70
Silicosis	110	74	69	68	109	67	65	86	61	63
Tuberculosis	29	30	42	30	18	16	25	18	11	17
Mesothelioma [#]	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	15	12	13
Gas poisoning	30	26	28	4	5	1	4	17	17	11
Asbestosis	9	6	4	2	7	2	5	5	1	9
Occupational dermatitis	29	10	7	10	8	7	3	10	5	7
Streptococcus suis infection	0	0	1	6	0	1	3	0	3	1
Others	8	4	5	1	3	1	0	1	1	5
Total :	364	258	251	256	264	177	204	268	229	353

* The coverage of compensation under the Occupational Deafness Compensation Ordinance was extended in April 2010 to employees who have developed noise-induced monaural hearing loss. In 2011, there were a total of 69 such cases.

[#] Mesothelioma was prescribed as a new occupational disease under the Pneumoconiosis and Mesothelioma (Compensation) Ordinance in April 2008.