

For discussion on  
17 December 2013

## **Legislative Council Panel on Manpower**

### **A Report on Occupational Diseases and Occupational Health Performance in Hong Kong in the First Half of 2013**

#### **Purpose**

This paper briefs Members on the situation of occupational diseases in Hong Kong in the first half of 2013, and the promotion and enforcement work of the Labour Department (LD) to enhance occupational health in the transport industry, container terminal and construction industry.

#### **Occupational Diseases**

2. The Employees' Compensation Ordinance ("ECO"), Occupational Deafness (Compensation) Ordinance ("ODCO") and Pneumoconiosis and Mesothelioma (Compensation) Ordinance ("PMCO") prescribe a total of 52 occupational diseases. 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 this criterion and having regard to the local situation, LD has been considering whether certain diseases should be prescribed as occupational diseases or the coverage of some occupational diseases should be expanded. LD has produced guides and guidance notes on occupational diseases for the public and registered medical practitioners respectively.

3. In the first half of 2013, the number of confirmed cases of occupational diseases was 104, with a decrease by about 37% when compared with 164 cases in the same period of 2012. The common occupational diseases included occupational deafness, silicosis and tenosynovitis of the hand or forearm. The details are set out in paragraphs 4 to 10 below and the relevant statistics are in the Annex.

#### ***Occupational Deafness***

4. Occupational deafness is a permanent hearing loss arising from at least 5 to 10 years of exposure to noisy environment at work in the specified occupations. Most of these cases were related to rock grinding,

chiselling, cutting or percussion and working in close proximity to internal combustion engines, turbines or pressurised jet engines. LD amended the ODCO in 2010 to extend the coverage of compensation to employees suffering from monaural hearing loss and those who were compensated but their hearing loss has worsened. In the first half of 2013, there were 35 cases of occupational deafness.

### ***Tenosynovitis of the Hand or Forearm***

5. The ECO prescribes 6 musculoskeletal diseases (including tenosynovitis of the hand or forearm) as occupational diseases, because epidemiological evidence reveals that these diseases have strong relationship with certain occupations. For example, prolonged repetitive actions or excessive force exerted by the hand at work could cause tenosynovitis. In the first half of 2013, there were 16 confirmed cases, with patients engaged in services and sales, clerical or cleansing work, etc.

### ***Silicosis***

6. 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. The patients of most cases were construction workers who had exposure to silica dust many years ago, some of whom had been engaged in high-risk hand-dug caisson work. The number of confirmed cases was 31 in the first half of 2013.

### ***Mesothelioma***

7. 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 2008. In the first half of 2013, there were 7 confirmed cases.

### ***Tuberculosis***

8. In the first half of 2013, there were 4 confirmed cases of tuberculosis in workers having close and frequent contacts with a relevant source of infection by reason of their employment. These patients included nurses and other personal care workers.

### ***Compressed Air Illnesses***

9. Most of the compressed air illnesses result from the presence of gas bubbles in body tissues. Patients are mainly workers engaged in compressed air work. When they undergo decompression process,

nitrogen dissolved in blood during compression may be released to form bubbles. This type of compressed air illness is called decompression illness. With the commencement of a number of large-scale infrastructure projects in recent years, the number of tunneling works with compressed air process has increased significantly. There were 12 cases of compressed air illnesses in 2012. LD had investigated all these cases, and taken enforcement action against the contractors concerned to urge them to improve the compressed air process. After LD's intervention, the number of compressed air illnesses decreased to 1 case in the first half of 2013.

### ***Other Occupational Diseases***

10. Other occupational diseases confirmed in the first half of 2013 included 1 case of asbestosis, 2 cases of occupational dermatitis and 4 cases of avian chlamydiosis.

## **Occupational Health Situation**

### **Initiatives of LD in Promoting Occupational Health**

11. LD has been promoting 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 radio, publishing feature articles in newspapers, and showing educational videos on mobile advertising media from time to time. Besides, LD organizes outreaching health talks. In the first half of 2013, a total of 536 occupational health talks on various topics, including occupational health of cleansing workers, manual handling operations and prevention of back injuries, occupational health of professional drivers, occupational stress and occupational health of catering workers, etc., were organized with over 16 000 participants.

12. We have been working together with the Occupational Safety and Health Council ("OSHC"), Pneumoconiosis Compensation Fund Board, Occupational Deafness Compensation Board, employers' associations and workers' unions, in promoting occupational health through a variety of activities including health talks, carnivals, occupational health award presentations and experience-sharing sessions, as well as workplace hygiene charter signing, etc.

### **Occupational Safety and Health of Professional Drivers**

13. At the meeting on 19 November 2013, a Member requested LD to

report to the Panel the outcome of the review of relevant legislation that protects professional drivers at the next meeting.

14. The Road Traffic Ordinance ("RTO") regulates road safety issues concerning all drivers, including the design and maintenance of vehicles and roads, drivers' driving skills, the use of vehicle safety devices, and the behaviour of other road users. The Road Traffic (Construction and Maintenance of Vehicles) Regulations regulate the construction and maintenance of vehicles, including safety after alteration and driver's driving cabin providing adequate protection to drivers against bad weather; the Road Traffic (Safety Equipment) Regulations regulate the safety equipment of vehicles (such as seat belts in cabin); and the Road Traffic (Traffic Control) Regulations and the Road Traffic (Driving Licences) Regulations, etc. Given that the RTO has regulated driving safety issues concerning drivers (including professional drivers), the Occupational Safety and Health Ordinance ("OSHO") does not cover the driver's cabin of a vehicle. Indeed, factors like drivers' driving attitude, road conditions and the behaviour of other road users are beyond the employers' control. Nevertheless, the OSHO safeguards employed drivers' occupational safety and health (OSH), when they are not carrying out driving work. Their employers have to provide the drivers with a safe and healthy working environment, such as providing appropriate aiding tools for performing work involving manual labour or repetitive actions. In addition, Employees' Compensation Ordinance ("ECO") stipulates that if an employee sustains an injury, dies or suffers from a prescribed occupational disease as a result of an accident arising out of and in the course of his employment, his employer is liable to pay compensation.

15. LD has analyzed the occupational health problems of professional drivers and found that the main potential hazards include noise and vibration from parts of vehicles, heat stress and driver's living habits. Proper vehicle design and regular maintenance could solve the noise and vibration issues. All non-air-conditioned buses ceased operation in 2011 and the heat stress problem has greatly reduced. As regards potential health problems arising from the living and eating habits of professional drivers, LD collaborated with the Department of Health and OSHC to launch a series of activities with healthy living as the main theme.

16. We launched a kick-off ceremony for the thematic promotional campaign in May last year. The Physical Fitness Association of Hong Kong demonstrated stretching exercise and DH gave a talk on the topic of healthy living. Fruit, OSH publications and souvenirs were distributed to professional drivers. This year, we continue to make use of the following channels to disseminate to professional drivers the health messages of balanced diet, regular exercise, quit smoking and drink less as well as

prevention of heat stroke:

- (i) Outreaching visits – we paid a number of visits to large public transport interchanges of buses, taxis, public light buses, and trams, factory loading areas and container terminals together with worker’s union of the industry. We distributed OSH materials, such as guidelines on preventive measures, cooling scarves and water bottles to professional drivers to promote OSH and heat stroke prevention messages to them directly.
- (ii) Radio publicity – LD collaborated with Radio Television Hong Kong ("RTHK") to broadcast “Prevention of Heat Stroke Occupational Safety Trivia” and “Prevention of Heat Stroke Occupational Safety and Health”. Besides, we collaborated with the Traffic Channel of RTHK to broadcast OSH tips after traffic news to remind professional drivers to pay attention to OSH.
- (iii) Publicity video broadcast – we showed publicity videos on mobile advertising media on board public transport to remind professional driver to pay attention to occupational health, drink plenty of water in hot summer and do stretching exercise regularly.
- (iv) OSH courses and workshops – OSHC organized “Occupational Safety and Health for Professional Drivers” and “Workshop on Fitness Exercise for Professional Drivers” courses to assist professional drivers to reduce accidents caused by work as well as to advise professional drivers on practical fitness exercise at work, which could be performed before work or during rest breaks to relax and strength the muscles, in order to prevent muscle strain.
- (v) Occupational health talks –LD and DH delivered public health talks on “Healthy Living for Professional Drivers” during gatherings of the motor transport industry. We have also organized several health talks for MTR drivers.

## **OSH of container terminal workers**

17. The occupational safety and health of container terminal workers, including arrangement of meals, toilet breaks as well as work during typhoon and bad weather conditions have been matters of concern to LD. LD has urged container handling operators to make improvements in these areas. At present, crane operators can opt to leave the control cabin to

take meal for one hour. Besides, a number of additional toilets were added in the container terminal areas, and a procedure was put in place to ensure that crane operators can reach the toilet in a reasonable time after giving notification.

18 LD has urged the container handling industry to pay attention to work arrangements under bad weather conditions, risk assessment on work in hot environment and prevention of heat stroke, safety management of heavy machinery and vehicles, work-at-height safety, etc. At present, the industry has improved the “Guidelines on work under adverse weather conditions” for employees, clearly stipulating the work procedures to be taken after the typhoon signal no. 8 is hoisted. Relevant preparation must be completed before the typhoon signal no. 8 is hoisted. When the typhoon signal no. 8 is hoisted, unless outdoor work has to be done for emergency or unexpected matters, all duty workers must stay indoor.

19. Regarding neck and back strain of crane operators in the process of controlling the upward and downward movements of containers, LD has urged the container handling operators to implement improvement measures, including proper maintenance of cranes and ensuring the integrity of operators' seats, as well as provision of extra back rests for the operators. Besides, the container handling operators have produced audiovisual materials about stretching exercise to encourage and guide workers to do proper stretching exercise during rest breaks.

### **Prevention of Heat Stroke at Work**

20. In collaboration with the OSHC, Construction Industry Council, and relevant employers' associations and workers' unions, LD launched a series of publicity and educational activities from April to September 2013, targeting workplaces with a higher risk of heat stroke (e.g. construction sites, outdoor cleansing and horticulture workplaces, kitchens and airport ramp cargo handling areas. 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 Announcements in the Public Interest through various media, and conducting promotional visits to outdoor workplaces. Besides, during the same period, LD conducted 30 646 inspections targeting outdoor workplaces with a higher risk of heat stroke, with 219 warnings and 1 improvement notice issued.

21. As regards rest break arrangement for construction workers, the

relevant construction associations implemented in construction sites the flexible rest break arrangement for bar benders in the summer this year, namely one additional rest break in the morning, in order to reduce the risk of heat stroke at work in hot weather. Besides, the Construction Industry Council published a set of updated guidelines this year, recommending the industry to give an extra 15 minutes rest break every morning for contraction workers in May to September every year. This recommendation would be included in the terms of government construction work contracts.

22. Furthermore, in collaboration with OSHC, LD launched the “Cooling Vest Promotion Pilot Scheme” in the summer of 2013 to test out the feasibility of using cooling vests in the construction, outdoor cleansing, horticulture, and catering industries as well as airport ramp cargo handling work. We hope that, through the scheme, the 195 participating establishments test out how to effectively manage and implement various supporting measures for the use of cooling vests so as to assess the feasibility of widespread promotion.

### **Way Forward**

23. 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 will continue to ensure that employers comply with the occupational safety and health legislation through enforcement.

Labour and Welfare Bureau  
Labour Department  
December 2013

Occupational Diseases Confirmed in Hong Kong from 2009 to first half of 2013

Occupational disease	2009	2010	2011	2012	First half of 2012	First half of 2013
Occupational deafness*	77	70	157	99	53	35
Tenosynovitis of the hand or forearm	39	48	70	69	42	16
Silicosis	86	61	63	44	22	31
Tuberculosis	18	11	17	15	10	4
Mesothelioma	15	12	13	12	7	7
Gas poisoning	17	17	11	14	14	3
Asbestosis	5	1	9	3	0	1
Compressed air illnesses	1	1	3	12	7	1
Occupational dermatitis	10	5	7	3	2	2
Streptococcus suis infection	0	3	1	1	1	0
Others	1	1	5	8	6	4
<b>Total :</b>	<b>268</b>	<b>229</b>	<b>353</b>	<b>280</b>	<b>164</b>	<b>104</b>

Notes

\*: The coverage of compensation under the Occupational Deafness Compensation Ordinance was extended in 2010 to employees suffering from noise-induced monaural hearing loss. In the first half of 2013, there were a total of 19 such cases.