

For information on
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Legislative Council Panel on Manpower

Occupational Disease and Occupational Health Situation in 2018

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on occupational disease and occupational health situation in Hong Kong in 2018, and the related promotion and enforcement work of the Labour Department (LD).

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 (ILO), occupational diseases are diseases having specific or strong relationship with occupations of the patients. In considering whether certain diseases should be prescribed as occupational diseases or whether the coverage of some occupational diseases should be expanded in Hong Kong, LD makes reference to ILO criteria and adopts an evidence-based approach to assess objectively whether a specific or strong causal relationship exists between a disease and a certain type of work. In doing so, LD will take into account whether there is sufficient medical evidence, as well as the relevant local research and disease data, etc. LD has produced guides and guidance notes on occupational diseases for the public and registered medical practitioners respectively.

3. Besides, if employees suffer from diseases caused by accidents related to their employment, and such diseases have caused temporary and/or permanent loss of earning capacity, the employees may still claim compensation from their employers in accordance with ECO, though the diseases are not occupational diseases prescribed in ECO.

4. In 2018, the number of confirmed cases of occupational diseases was 400. The common occupational diseases included occupational deafness, silicosis and tenosynovitis of the hand or forearm. Details are set out in paragraphs 5 to 8 below and the relevant statistics are at Annex.

Occupational Deafness

5. Occupational deafness is permanent hearing loss arising from at least five to ten years of exposure to noisy environment at work in specified occupations. Most of these cases are related to rock grinding, chiselling, cutting or percussion, metal grinding and working in close proximity to internal combustion engines, turbines or pressurised jet engines. In 2018, there were 275 confirmed cases of occupational deafness (including monaural hearing loss). According to ODCO, applicants can apply for compensation to the Occupational Deafness Compensation Board as long as they meet the relevant criteria like occupation and deafness requirements. In view of the long latent period of occupational deafness and workers' awareness about this disease, the number of applications for compensation received by the Board can vary greatly every year.

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 are construction workers who were exposed to silica dust many years ago. The number of confirmed cases of silicosis was 59 in 2018.

Tenosynovitis of the Hand or Forearm

7. ECO prescribes six musculoskeletal diseases (including tenosynovitis of the hand or forearm) as occupational diseases, because epidemiological evidence reveals that these diseases have specific relationship with certain occupations. For example, prolonged repetitive actions or excessive force exerted by the hand at work could cause tenosynovitis. In 2018, there were 39 confirmed cases of tenosynovitis of the hand or forearm, with patients engaged in service industries and sales, clerical support, elementary occupations, etc. LD will continue to conduct publicity for duty holders and workers of relevant industries to enhance their awareness on prevention of upper limb musculoskeletal diseases.

Other Occupational Diseases

8. Other confirmed cases of occupational diseases in 2018 include 10 cases of mesothelioma, 4 cases of tuberculosis (patients include nurses and personal care workers), 4 cases of gas poisoning, 3 cases of occupational dermatitis, 2 cases of asbestosis, 2 case of infection by *Streptococcus suis*, 1 case of compressed air illness and 1 case of carpal tunnel syndrome.

Occupational Health Situation

Initiatives of LD in Enhancing Occupational Health

9. LD has been promoting the awareness of employers and employees on the prevention of occupational and work-related diseases by organising health talks and seminars, distributing educational publications, broadcasting Announcements in the Public Interest (APIs) on television and radio, publishing feature articles in newspapers, showing educational videos and displaying advertisements on mobile advertising media from time to time. Besides, LD organises outreaching health talks. In 2018, over 1200 occupational health talks on various topics, including prevention of upper limb and lower limb disorders, manual handling operations and prevention of back injuries, how to prevent heat stroke, occupational stress and occupational health of catering workers, etc., were organised for nearly 41 000 participants.

10. LD collaborates 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 which include health talks, carnivals, as well as occupational health award presentations and experience-sharing sessions, etc.

Prevention of Heat Stroke at Work

11. Hong Kong is getting increasingly hot during summer. LD is very concerned about the hazard of heat stroke to which employees may be exposed while working under very hot weather. To reduce the risk of heat stroke to employees, LD has adopted the three-pronged strategy of publicity and promotion, education and training, as well as inspection and enforcement. In respect of publicity and education, LD launched a series of publicity and educational activities between April and September 2018 in collaboration with OSHC, the Construction Industry Council (CIC), as well as relevant employers’ associations and workers’ unions, targeting at workplaces with a higher risk of heat stroke (e.g. construction sites, workplaces of outdoor cleansing workers, horticulture workers and security guards, etc.) to enhance the awareness of employers and employees on the prevention of heat stroke at work. These activities included conducting promotional visits to outdoor workplaces, and distributing relevant guidelines, checklists for heat stress assessment and promotional items. The checklists for heat stress assessment cover all the major risk factors including temperature, humidity, heat radiation, air movement, workload, workers’ clothing and their acclimatization to the hot environment. They aim to help employers fully understand the risk of heat stroke during work

and take effective control measures. In 2018, LD also continued to organise health talks, conduct various OSH publicity activities, distribute promotional items on the prevention of heat stroke to employers and employees through the occupational safety publicity stands at large housing estates, shopping malls and commercial buildings, etc., broadcast television and radio APIs, in order to raise the awareness of the public and workers on the prevention of heat stroke.

12. In view of the higher risk of heat stroke to workers in the construction industry, LD has also sent letters to construction contractors, trade associations, unions and registered safety officers, etc. to remind them of the systemic safety management measures against heat stroke. In addition, LD has contacted concerned government departments and requested them to urge their contractors to take effective heat stroke preventive measures. LD's OSH Complaint Hotline is included in the above-mentioned letters to encourage workers and safety officers to lodge complaints to LD against employers who have not implemented effective heat stroke preventive measures so that LD can take follow-up action.

13. During April to September 2018, LD conducted nearly 29 000 inspections targeting at outdoor workplaces with a higher risk of heat stroke, including construction sites, container terminals/container yards, and workplaces of outdoor cleansing workers, horticulture workers and security guards, and issued 90 warning letters. During the inspections, LD would check whether the duty holders had taken appropriate preventive measures, including providing adequate drinking water to employees, keeping employees off direct sunlight as far as possible, ensuring good ventilation at the workplaces, etc., with a view to effectively safeguarding employees' occupational safety and health. During the inspections, if employers were found to have failed to adopt appropriate measures, LD would take appropriate enforcement actions, including taking out prosecution against suspected offenders where there was sufficient evidence.

14. In May this year, LD launched a large-scale promotion campaign on heat stroke prevention in collaboration with OSHC, which lasted for about five months. Through distributing protective equipment, broadcasting a new publicity video and conducting extensive publicity, the campaign sought to remind outdoor workers of the potential hazards of working under very hot weather and the need to take suitable preventive measures, including drinking more water or other electrolytes containing beverages, wearing light-coloured air permeable clothing, wearing wide-brimmed hats or safety helmets with neck shades, wearing arm covers, etc. We also reminded workers to be more aware of their body conditions on the occurrence of symptoms of heat-related illnesses, take rest at a shaded area and drink water immediately upon noticing the symptoms, and notify supervisors to

take appropriate actions. The main targets of this large-scale campaign were employees undertaking manual work and/or those who often needed to work outdoors. These included construction workers, outdoor cleansing workers, horticulture workers, security guards, container terminal workers and airport apron workers.

Prevention of Health Hazards associated with Standing at Work

15. Many employees often work in a standing position. For some standing work involving restricted movement, for example, cashier work at retail shops or customer service counter work in other service industries, employees are more likely to have muscle ache and fatigue, and pressure on the legs. Continuous pressure at legs is associated with various kinds of lower limb disorders. LD therefore has always been very concerned about the occupational health of employees whose work involves standing, and has strengthened the relevant occupational safety and health awareness of employers and employees through different means and channels.

16. To further safeguard employees against the health risks associated with standing at work, LD issued “Guidance Notes on Standing at Work and Service Counter Design” (“GN”) in December 2018. In addition to setting out the possible health hazards which may be caused by standing at work and the preventive measures, the GN also emphasises that employers must, so far as reasonably practicable, provide suitable work chairs or chairs for occasional resting at the working locations to the employees who are engaged in standing work with restricted movement. The GN also provides recommendations on service counter design.

17. Since its issue, LD has widely publicised the GN and will continue the work in this area, including organising health talks and distributing pamphlets. Besides, LD will continue to enhance the awareness of employers and employees on reducing the health risks of standing at work through publishing feature articles in newspapers and producing television and radio APIs. On the other hand, LD has also deployed manpower to strengthen promotional visits and inspection work to assist employers in complying with the requirements of the new GN. Targeting at the retail industry, catering industry, property management industry and hotel industry, LD has organised meetings with the management of the relevant large corporations to explain the requirements of the GN and urged them to enhance their measures on protecting the workers through a holistic and unified approach. LD also conducts surprise inspections, during which appropriate enforcement actions will be taken against employers found to have failed to take necessary measures in accordance with the new GN. Such actions include taking out prosecution against non-compliant employers where there is sufficient evidence. During the routine inspections,

LD will also distribute the new GN to employees so that more employees can better understand how to reduce the health risks associated with standing at work.

Clinical Consultation Service of Occupational Health Clinics

18. LD runs two occupational health clinics in Kwun Tong and Fanling, providing clinical consultation service to all employees in Hong Kong Island, Kowloon, and the New Territories. Employees who suspect their diseases to be work-related can make an appointment in these two clinics for diagnosis and treatment. The doctors will examine the patients' comprehensive medical and occupational history and the circumstances of the work, body condition and the relevant living habit, and conduct physical examinations and arrange relevant laboratory tests. They may also arrange inspections to patients' workplaces if necessary to understand whether there are hazardous factors in their workplaces that are related to the diseases. Through comprehensive analysis of such information, the doctors can diagnose whether the patients' conditions are consistent with occupational diseases or other work-related diseases, and provide suitable treatment for them. For the convenience of employees who have to work from Monday to Friday in seeking clinical consultations, the occupational health clinics are also open on Saturday mornings. In 2018, the clinics provided 10 890 clinical consultations.

19. LD promotes the services of the occupational health clinics to employers and employees through health talks, large-scale public talks, seminars and distribution of pamphlets and posters, as well as showing information videos and displaying advertisements in major public transport facilities from time to time. Besides, LD also disseminates information about the occupational health clinics through the internet, newsletters of unions and publications of OSHC to promote the services of the clinics.

Way Forward

20. 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 OSH legislation through enforcement.

Confirmed Cases of Occupational Diseases from 2014 to 2018

Occupational disease	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Occupational deafness	102	133	184	177	275
Silicosis	68	56	43	54	59
Tenosynovitis of the hand or forearm	64	31	63	39	39
Mesothelioma	14	13	7	16	10
Tuberculosis	7	9	6	9	4
Gas poisoning	6	7	14	1	4
Occupational dermatitis	1	3	11	3	3
Asbestosis	2	0	4	2	2
Compressed air illness	2	2	0	1	1
Others	1	2	2	2	3
Total :	267	256	334	304	400