

For information on
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Legislative Council Panel on Manpower

Occupational Disease and Occupational Health Situation in 2020

Purpose

This paper briefs Members on the occupational disease and occupational health situation in Hong Kong in 2020, as well as the occupational health promotion and enforcement work of the Labour Department (“LD”).

Occupational Disease

2. According to the definition of the International Labour Organization (“ILO”), occupational disease refers to a disease which has a causal relationship with specific exposure in the working environment or work activity, and the risk of the disease occurring among the exposed workers is significantly higher than that in the rest of the population, so that the occupational origin of the disease in an exposed worker can be reasonably presumed.

3. In Hong Kong, there is currently a total of 52 occupational diseases prescribed under the Employees’ Compensation Ordinance (“ECO”), Occupational Deafness (Compensation) Ordinance (“ODCO”) and Pneumoconiosis and Mesothelioma (Compensation) Ordinance (“PMCO”). In considering whether a particular disease should be prescribed as a statutory occupational disease or whether the coverage of certain occupational diseases should be expanded, LD generally makes reference to the ILO criteria and adopts an evidence-based approach to assess whether a definite causal relationship exists between a disease and specific hazard exposure at work, and whether the risk of the disease occurring among the exposed workers is significantly higher than that among the general public. This includes perusing relevant medical information as well as local and overseas research and epidemiological data.

Confirmed Cases of Occupational Diseases in 2020

4. In 2020, the number of confirmed cases of occupational diseases was 216. The common occupational diseases included silicosis, occupational deafness, tenosynovitis of the hand or forearm, asbestosis and mesothelioma. Details are set out in paragraphs 5 to 9 below and the relevant statistics are at Annex.

Silicosis

5. Silicosis is a fibrotic lung disease caused by inhalation of silica dust. Its latent period could be as long as 10 to 20 years. The disease in most cases was attributable to inhalation of silica dust at work many years ago. The number of confirmed cases of silicosis was 88 in 2020. Most cases were construction workers.

Occupational Deafness

6. Occupational deafness is permanent hearing loss arising from at least five to ten years of exposure to noisy environment at work in specified occupations. In 2020, there were 78 confirmed cases of occupational deafness (including monaural hearing loss). Most of these cases were involved in rock grinding, chiselling, cutting or percussion and working in close proximity to internal combustion engines, turbines or pressurised jet engines.

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 2020, there were 17 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.

Asbestosis and Mesothelioma

8. Similar to silicosis, asbestosis is a fibrotic lung disease with a very long latent period, which generally can reach 20 to 30 years. The disease

in most cases was related to occupational exposure to asbestos dust many years ago. Apart from asbestosis, exposure to asbestos could also cause mesothelioma, and the average latent period of the disease could be as long as 30 to 40 years. In 2020, there were 12 confirmed cases of asbestosis and mesothelioma respectively. The work of these cases included construction site demolition, ship repairing and maintenance, boiler repairing, etc.

Other Occupational Diseases

9. Other confirmed cases of occupational diseases in 2020 included 3 cases of tuberculosis, 3 cases of gas poisoning, 2 cases of occupational dermatitis and 1 case of occupational asthma.

Occupational Health Situation

Initiatives to Enhance Occupational Health

10. 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 the 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 2020, LD organised over 360 occupational health talks for about 25 000 participants. The topics included prevention of upper limb and lower limb disorders, manual handling operations and prevention of back injuries, heat stroke prevention, occupational stress and occupational health of catering workers, etc. Owing to the COVID-19 epidemic last year, some of the health talks were conducted online so that employers and employees could continue to participate.

11. LD also collaborated with the Occupational Safety and Health Council (OSHC), Pneumoconiosis Compensation Fund Board, ODCB, employers’ associations and workers’ unions in promoting occupational health through a variety of activities. These included organisation of health talks and occupational health award, distribution of promotional materials, etc. Some of the health talks were also conducted online because of the COVID-19 epidemic.

Prevention of Heat Stroke at Work

12. 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 a 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 large-scale promotional campaign on heat stroke prevention in collaboration with OSHC in May 2020, which lasted for about five months. Through distributing protective equipment, broadcasting 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 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 alert 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, airport apron workers and recycling workers. In view of the positive response received in the promotional campaign, LD and OSHC launched a similar campaign in April this year with the addition of postal workers and couriers, as well as electrical and mechanical industry workers as the promotion targets.

13. To enhance workers' awareness of heat stroke and encourage their adoption of related preventive measures, LD and OSHC launched the Portable Waist Fan Sponsorship Scheme for SMEs in April this year to sponsor small and medium-sized enterprises in nine industries with a higher risk of heat stroke to buy portable waist fans at a discounted price. According to the evaluation result on OSHC's large-scale promotional campaign on heat stroke prevention in 2020, portable waist fan was the most popular cooling product. The fan is small in size. Mounted on the waist, the fan delivers cool air under the clothing and helps to dissipate heat. It also keeps the skin dry and prevents it from sticking to the clothes with the sweat. Requiring no hands for its operation, the fan allows the worker to work freely. After the launch of the scheme, there was overwhelming response from the industries. LD and OSHC are considering to increase the sponsorship quota to benefit more employees.

14. On very hot days, LD also reminds employers and employees to take preventive measures against heat stroke through issuing press releases and radio broadcast. In addition, with effect from April 2020 and as proposed by LD, the Hong Kong Observatory has added an alert on heat stroke prevention when issuing push messages of Very Hot Weather Warning to the public through mobile apps to provide timely alert to employees and the public.

15. In respect of inspection and enforcement, LD conducted about 22 000 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 2 improvement notices and 11 warning letters during April to September 2020. 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, and providing suitable rest breaks, 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.

Establishment of the Central Promotion Team

16. To better assist large corporations in enhancing their occupational health performance, the Occupational Health Service of LD set up a Central Promotion Team in August 2020. The Team aims to promote good work practice to the management of these corporations to safeguard the occupational health of employees. The Team will set the theme for promotion with regard to the work situation and occupational health risks of specific industries. The Team members will liaise with the targeted large corporations for a visit to explain the relevant requirements under the legislation and guidelines relating to the theme and urge them to implement relevant measures through a top-down, holistic and unified approach for strengthening the protection of workers' health at work.

17. Since its set up, the Central Promotion Team has conducted promotional visits to a total of 50 large corporations of targeted industries including retail industry, catering industry, property management industry and hotel industry. Advice was given to the employers to follow the

requirements of the “Guidance Notes on Standing at Work and Service Counter Design” issued by LD to further reduce health risks associated with standing at work. In addition, the team also conducted promotional visits to all the five street cleaning contractors of the Food and Environmental Hygiene Department last year and helped them to adopt precautionary measures to prevent heat stroke in cleaning workers during work. LD is currently conducting workplace field visits to the concerned corporations to assess their implementation of good work practice.

Mental Health Workplace Charter

18. LD has been collaborating with DH and the OSHC to implement the Mental Health Workplace Charter (“Charter”) since July 2020. The Charter aims to promote mental health in the workplace, develop a culture of active listening and communication, facilitate early identification of mentally disturbed colleagues and provide them with an inclusive and friendly working environment.

19. Organisations signing the Charter are entitled to professional support and information on community resources on mental health. They must commit to complete a specified number of action items, such as organising interest groups, arranging staff to participate in training courses on mental health and communication skills, providing employee assistance scheme, implementing work-life balance measures, etc., in order to attain the title of “Mental Health Friendly Organisation” or “Mental Health Friendly Supreme Organisation” for listing in the Charter website. As at the end of April 2021, about 400 and 200 organisations had been awarded the title of “Mental Health Friendly Organisation” and “Mental Health Friendly Supreme Organisation” respectively.

Clinical Consultation Service of Occupational Health Clinics

20. 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 2020, the clinics provided a total of 6 327 clinical consultations.

21. In order to further promote the services of the occupational health clinics, apart from continuing with the distribution of pamphlets and posters on clinics services in health talks and seminars as well as putting up advertisements via the internet, newsletters of unions and publications of OSHC, LD also stepped up advertising the clinic services in major public transport including buses, minibuses and railways in 2020. In addition, new television and radio APIs were produced and broadcasting commenced in the first quarter of 2021 to raise the public awareness of clinic services.

Way Forward

22. LD will continue to actively promote the prevention of occupational and work-related diseases, enhance the awareness of employers and employees on occupational health and ensure their compliance with OSH legislation through enforcement.

Labour and Welfare Bureau
Labour Department
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Confirmed Cases of Occupational Diseases from 2016 to 2020

| Occupational disease | 2016 | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 |
|--------------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Silicosis | 43 | 54 | 59 | 52 | 88 |
| Occupational deafness | 184 | 177 | 275 | 308 | 78 |
| Tenosynovitis of the hand or forearm | 63 | 39 | 39 | 35 | 17 |
| Mesothelioma | 7 | 16 | 10 | 10 | 12 |
| Asbestosis | 4 | 2 | 2 | 7 | 12 |
| Tuberculosis | 6 | 9 | 4 | 5 | 3 |
| Gas poisoning | 14 | 1 | 4 | 17 | 3 |
| Occupational dermatitis | 11 | 3 | 3 | 5 | 2 |
| Compressed air illness | 0 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Others | 2 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 1 |
| Total : | 334 | 304 | 400 | 442 | 216 |