

Risks

TUC 

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**HAZARDS
MAGAZINE**



**Asbestos -
The hidden killer**

Hazards at Work

updated second edition
now available

Risks is the TUC's weekly online bulletin for safety reps and others, read each week by over 16,000 subscribers and 1,500 on the TUC website. To receive this bulletin every week, click [here](#). Past issues are [available](#). This edition contains [Useful links](#) [TUC courses for safety reps](#) [Disclaimer and Privacy](#)

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Print work caused kidney disease

A printer who was exposed to a dangerous chemical in the workplace developed a debilitating kidney disease as a result. Unite member David Owenson, from Scarborough, was diagnosed with membranous neuropathy, a form of glomerulonephritis, following years of exposure to the common workplace solvent toluene. The exposures occurred at Polestar Greaves in Scarborough where he was first employed as a maintenance engineer and then as a printer. The company printed magazine supplements for News International. In 2000, Mr Owenson started to feel unwell so he went to see his GP. He was referred to a consultant nephrologist (kidney specialist) who said it was safe for him to continue to work with the substance. However a specialist retained by union solicitors said toluene had had a major effect on Mr Owenson's kidney function and advised him to minimise his exposure. Mr Owenson stopped work and retired due to ill-health. Although Polestar Greaves admitted that it had, from time to time, exposed Mr Owenson to excessive levels of toluene, it denied that the toluene had caused or contributed to the development of the kidney disease. After a lengthy legal battle, however, they agreed to settle the compensation case for an undisclosed sum. Unite regional secretary Davey Hall commented: "Medical practitioners may not ask questions about occupational exposure to chemicals when confronted with bladder cancer, kidney disease or other illnesses. It is however extremely important that, when such a disease develops, thought is given to historical working practices and exposure to chemicals and other substances in the workplace." Judith Gledhill from Thompsons Solicitors, who acted for Mr Owenson on behalf of the union, said: "Fumes from noxious chemicals can cause a variety of diseases including bladder cancer, lung disease and damage to internal organs. Such claims are amongst the most complex and challenging cases that a personal injury lawyer encounters. Not only is it necessary to prove that the employer is liable for the exposure, but also that the exposure caused or made a material contribution to the development of the disease."

- [Thompsons Solicitors news release](#). Did your job cause your illness... check out the [Hazards detective](#).

TUC concern at Turkish shipyard deaths

The TUC has called on the Turkish government to bring to an end the "horrendous record of death and maiming" at a major shipyard complex in the country. In a letter to the ambassador at Turkey's London embassy, TUC general secretary Brendan Barber wrote: "The TUC is deeply concerned about the fatalities and injuries that are occurring in Tuzla's Shipyards. We understand that, Mr Cemil Akgul (28) who was employed by the Elta Denizcilik subcontractors at Cicek Shipyards, Tuzla died on 19 February 2009, of electrocution while working. Mr Akgul's was the 120th death in the shipyards since 1992." The shipyard complex has been the subject of a long-running union campaign, with protests against the death toll attracting widespread public support. Over 5,000 joined a protest march to the yard in June last year ([Risks 362](#)). Mr Barber's

letter to Ambassador Alpogon notes: "Again we understand from the Turkish shipbuilding union LIMTER-IS SENDIKASI that this appalling record is due to some employers putting profits before proper safety measures and training for their workforce. The TUC urges the Turkish government to take the appropriate steps to ensure that this horrendous record of death and maiming is brought to an end. That these gross deficiencies in the health and safety practices, in Tuzla's shipyards, are eradicated for good. Creating the conditions in which Tuzla's shipyard workers can earn their living without being in constant fear of life or limb."

- [TUC letter to the Turkish ambassador.](#)

'Robust' action needed on sea fatigue

Seafarers' union Nautilus is urging the government to act on an official call for measures to combat seafarer fatigue. A just published Marine Accident Investigation Branch (MAIB) report into the grounding of the Russian general cargoship Antari on the coast of Northern Ireland last June revealed that the watchkeeping officer, who had been working a gruelling six-on, six-off rota, had fallen asleep more than three hours before the ship grounded. MAIB called for "robust" government measures to address the problem. In a letter to transport secretary Geoff Hoon, Nautilus general secretary Brian Orrell wrote there is extensive evidence to show that fatigue presents "a clear and present danger" to ships and seafarers. The letter calls on the minister to confirm that the government will implement MAIB's recommendations. The union also wants the government to "undertake a concentrated inspection campaign to ensure that schedules of service at sea and in port (including maximum hours of work or minimum periods of rest per day and per week) are drawn up in consultation with the crew, or their representatives, and are posted onboard where all seafarers can see them, and that accurate records of hours of work or rest periods are maintained." The letter warns the minister it is "fairly miraculous" that there has so far been no catastrophic fatigue-related accident. The Antari's watchkeeping officer had been working a six-on/six-off rota and his sleep pattern had been disturbed by a port call and cargo operations. "As has been demonstrated in many previous accidents, such a routine on vessels engaged in near coastal trade poses a serious risk of cumulative fatigue," the MAIB investigation report said. It urged the UK to "instigate robust, unilateral measures to address the fatigue of bridge watchkeeping officers on vessels in UK waters and to ensure that a dedicated lookout is always posted at night, during restricted visibility, and as otherwise required in hazardous navigational situations."

- [Nautilus news release.](#) [MAIB Antari investigation report.](#)

No bonuses for 'dangerous' rail squeeze

There should be no question of paying telephone number bonuses to the Network Rail executives responsible for a "massive and dangerous squeeze" on track work and a lowering of track safety

standards, rail union RMT has said. The union says Network Rail (NR) bosses have ordered the deferral of 28 per cent of track renewals, threatening jobs throughout the industry and risking "a potentially catastrophic undermining of infrastructure safety." RMT general secretary Bob Crow, commenting at the union's health and safety conference in Doncaster last week, said: "What crazy system is it that contemplates rewarding bosses for putting off vital infrastructure upgrades, lowering track standards and cutting jobs? There should be no question of bonuses for bosses when the people out there trying to do the work are being stretched to breaking point, there are cuts in frequency of track inspections and cuts in routine signals maintenance." He added: "It beggars belief that in the current economic climate NR should be allowed to contemplate a massive cut in essential renewals, but contemplating paying huge bonuses to the bosses carrying them out adds insult to injury." An Early Day Motion tabled by Labour MP David Drew backed the union stance and "urges the government to use its power as funder of Network Rail immediately to intervene to ensure that this essential rail renewals work is not deferred, to introduce a moratorium on job cuts and to develop an industry-wide strategy to ensure that railways can be managed in a way which mitigates rather than exacerbates the effects of the economic downturn."

- [RMT news release. Early Day Motion 794, Network Rail and the economic downturn.](#)

Bullying boss blamed for breakdown

An NHS hospital trust has been found liable for the nervous breakdown suffered by a hospital admin worker. UNISON member Nanette Bowen, 55, has been unable to return to work after being bullied and harassed over a three-year-period. The information manager at the Prince Philip Hospital, Llanelli, had been employed at the trust for more than 28 years, working her way up the ranks, from porter to information manager, reporting directly to the chief executive of the Trust. Her problems starting in 2000 when new boss Eric Lewis was appointed, following the merger of Llanelli and Dinefwr Trusts to form Carmarthenshire NHS. Mrs Bowen said her life became hell, as she was not allowed to provide any information without her boss's written consent, was asked to fill in a daily form so he could see what work she was doing, and had her responsibility to hire staff removed. Mr Lewis was aggressive towards her when challenged, made sexual innuendoes and banned her from attending important meetings vital to her job. She was signed off sick with stress. When she tried to return to work, she suffered panic attacks. At one point she was rushed to hospital with a suspected heart attack. Mrs Bowen decided to take action through UNISON, who took a compensation claim to Swansea County Court, where Carmarthenshire NHS Trust was found liable. Mrs Bowen said: "My life has been ruined by what I went through during those three years. At this stage I cannot contemplate returning to any form of work and I am still receiving counselling to help me control my panic attacks. Without the support of my family and colleagues I would not be here now." Dave Galligan, UNISON's head of health in Wales, said: "It is disgraceful that this bullying and harassment continued for so long and led to a severe breakdown." A ruling on the level of compensation is expected over the next few weeks.

Mr Galligan said: "It's going to be a substantial, probably a six figure settlement. It is deserved, because not only was this a particularly bad case, it was badly handled over a period of time."

- [UNISON news release](#). [Morning Star](#). [South Wales Evening Post](#).

Ladder fall forces baker to retire

A bakery worker who was forced to give up his job after falling from a ladder has received £80,000 in compensation. Jeffery Phillips, 59, from Clowne in Chesterfield needed a hip replacement after falling 14ft onto a concrete floor after the ladder slipped as he was cleaning machinery. Mr Phillips, who worked as a cleaner for 11 years for Gunstones Bakery in Dronfield, has now been forced to retire due to ill health. The incident happened in August 2006 as the bakery, a supplier to major supermarket chains, was preparing for a visit by one of its customers. Mr Phillips, a member of the bakers' union BFAWU, had been asked to clean the top of a machine called a 'divider'. He used a ladder to reach the top but it slipped. The fall resulted in a broken hip, which required a hip replacement. He also fractured his elbow and still suffers from pins and needles in his fingers. Facing a union-backed compensation case, Gunstones Bakery admitted liability and settled the claim out of court. Mr Phillips said: "I decided to pursue compensation because I wanted the company to take full responsibility for the accident. I had never been trained in using ladders and I wanted to make sure the correct training was provided to my colleagues in the future." Ronnie Draper, BFAWU's national president and safety officer, said: "Falls from heights are the number one cause of workplace deaths. With a little more planning and assessment of the risks, understanding of the limitations of ladders, proper maintenance and checking that users are competent, these accidents could be avoided."

- [Thompsons Solicitors news release](#). [Sheffield Star](#).

Injured nurse will not work again

A nurse from County Durham has been told she will never work again after damaging her back while trying to move a faulty hospital bed. UNISON member Jacqueline Crowe, 46, was forced to leave her job after the accident at South Moor Hospital, in Stanley. Mrs Crowe hurt her neck after trying to move the hospital bed to change the sheets. The bed brake failed to release, so when she pulled the bed towards her she jarred her back and neck. She is now suffering from depression and must take strong painkillers every day. Mrs Crowe said: "Lifting and handling was a large part of my job and I had been trained in the correct techniques. However, the bed's brake was faulty and the simplest move has led to me being unable to work." With legal support from UNISON, she took a claim to Newcastle County Court. The case was settled on the first day of the hearing, with Durham and Darlington Acute Hospitals NHS Trust agreeing to a £45,000 payout. Liz Twist, UNISON's regional head of health, commented: "Problems like this one can be avoided if the equipment is kept in good repair. We would urge all employers to make sure they are abiding by health and safety

regulations.” Michelle Reid-Mitchell from Thompsons Solicitors, the law firm retained by the union to represent Mrs Crowe, said: “If the hospital had ensured its equipment was in good working order Mrs Crowe would not have suffered from serious back pain for another seven years. A simple check of equipment could have avoided this accident.”

- [UNISON news release](#). [Newcastle Journal](#).

Other news

Carpenters 'face asbestos death'

One in 10 UK carpenters born in the 1940s will die of asbestos-related lung cancer or mesothelioma, researchers have predicted. The researchers calculated that men born in the 1940s who worked as carpenters for more than 10 years before they reached 30 have a lifetime risk for mesothelioma alone of about one in 17. For plumbers, electricians and decorators born in the same decade who worked in their trade for more than 10 years before they were 30, the risk is one in 50 and for other construction workers one in 125. The risk was also increased in other industries and the study showed that two-thirds of all British men and one quarter of women had worked in jobs involving potential asbestos exposure at some time in their lives. There was also a small increased risk in those who had lived with someone who had been exposed to asbestos. The UK mesothelioma death rate is now the highest in the world, with the annual toll now over 2,000 a year. The study, in the British Journal of Cancer, is based on interviews with more than 600 patients with mesothelioma and 1,400 healthy people. Overall, the projected lifetime risk of fatal mesothelioma in all British men born in the 1940s was about one in 170. Alan Ritchie, general secretary of construction union UCATT, said the finding were “deeply disturbing” and added: “It is scandalous that construction workers who are now most at risk of dying from asbestos were those who were young men in the 1960s and 1970s, working unprotected with a substance that bosses and the authorities were already aware was lethal.” He said: “It is time that the government took seriously deaths from asbestos, which mainly affect working class people. If this was a middle class disease then compensation would be higher and easier to obtain, the guilty would have been punished and prevention measures would be far stronger.”

- [HSE news release](#). [Occupational, domestic and environmental mesothelioma risk in the British population: a case-control study](#), British Journal of Cancer. [UCATT news release](#). [HSE hidden killer campaign](#).
- [Daily Mirror news item](#) and [Asbestos Timebomb campaign](#) webpage. [BBC News Online](#).

Computer firms won't chip in to cancer study

Britain's top computer chip companies are refusing to spend less than the price of a couple of pints per employee to research the cancer risks in their industry. The UK's multi-billion pound electronics industry, the world's fifth largest with 25,000 employees, is defying the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and

government who have asked the industry to contribute to the £600,000 report over four years. The union Unite has already pledged £60,000. It calculates it would cost the industry just £6 a year for each employee to fund the potentially life-saving research. The union now intends to campaign to get the firms to chip in. The call for additional UK studies came after more damning evidence from the United States, where a study at IBM found "significantly greater" cancer deaths than expected compared to the general population ([Risks 280](#)). But the UK employers are claiming there is insufficient evidence to justify the new research ([Risks 354](#)). Unite national officer Peter Skyte said: "The UK electronics industry is worth £23 billion a year, yet these highly profitable companies are refusing to fund a study despite troubling evidence showing there could be an increased risk of cancer to their staff. The industry is putting costs before people's lives and health – just to save the price of a couple of pints of lager per employee." Evidence from three separate studies has shown higher than average rates of certain cancers. An HSE study at National Semiconductor's plant in Greenock, outside Glasgow, found higher rates of four cancers. Unite is demanding further research to identify and address any cancer risks. HSE is scheduled to start a series of audits next month, to vet the semiconductor industry's arrangements to control known hazardous substances. Unite says this move is in response to pressure from the union.

- [UNITE news release.](#)

Work cancers are misattributed to smoking

A new study suggests many lung cancers are routinely misattributed to smoking, when workplace and other exposures are to blame. Scientists have concluded much of the known much higher lung cancer rates in workers with less education cannot be explained by smoking. The study, published online in the Journal of the National Cancer Institute on 24 February, found smoking history accounts for only half of the excess risk. Previous studies showed that individuals with a lower socioeconomic status have higher rates of lung cancer. 'Burying the evidence', a 2005 report from the journal *Hazards*, cites Peter Infante, formerly a top official with the US safety watchdog OSHA, who referred to occupational cancer, particularly lung cancers, as a blue collar epidemic. In the latest study, Gwenn Menvielle and colleagues examined the association of smoking, diet, education, and lung cancer in 391,251 individuals in the European Prospective Investigation into Cancer and Nutrition study. They found men with the lowest education had a 3.62-fold increased risk of lung cancer compared with men with the highest education. Women with the lowest education had a 2.39-fold increased risk compared with women with the highest education. When the researchers adjusted the risk models to account for smoking, the excess risk dropped by approximately half. Diet did not appear to contribute to the inequity. The paper notes "exposure to radon at home and occupational exposures may also contribute to the residual inequalities. Some rough estimates suggest that approximately 50 per cent of socioeconomic inequalities in lung cancer mortality could be attributable to occupational exposures, but there are few studies on this topic." European studies have suggested manual workers are more than eight times as likely to be exposed to workplace carcinogens as managers.

- [JNCI media briefing](#). Gwenn Menvielle and others. [The role of smoking and diet in explaining educational inequalities in lung cancer incidence](#), JNCI, volume 101, pages 321-330, 2009. [HESA news report](#). [Hazards work cancer prevention kit](#) and [cancer webpages](#).

Scandal of fake high visibility gear

Substandard high-visibility clothing is putting workers' lives at risk. A report in Health and Safety Bulletin (HSB) reveals many retailers have been selling fake or poor standard high-visibility clothing that, in the worst case, offered just over 1 per cent of the reflection required under the European Standard. The Department for Business Enterprise and Regulatory Reform (BERR) has promised to fund an investigation and bring the problem to the attention of local Trading Standards Authorities. The garments were tested by the Reflective Manufacturers Association (REMA), which found sub-standard garments on sale in two of the UK's largest supermarket chains, a car accessory chain and two multi-chain discount stores. The garments would be worn by many types of workers, including those working on the roads and on construction sites, as well as members of the public such as cyclists. Becky Allen, who wrote the HSB story, said: "REMA told me that a piece of toilet paper would reflect more light than some of the clothes it tested." She added: "Although many of the companies buying these garments would have done so in good faith, they should remember that if the garment is cheap, it's probably garbage." HSB editor Howard Fidderman said the government "should never have let this amount of junk onto the market in the first place. HM Revenue and Customs should be opening the containers on the dockside and running simple visibility checks. And Trading Standards should have picked this issue up a long time ago. The government's paranoia about adverse 'elf and safety' stories appears to have stopped it intervening earlier to protect the UK's workforce."

- [Health and Safety Bulletin](#).

Firm fined for fatal lifting blunders

A Croydon construction firm has been fined £66,000 after an employee was killed by a falling excavator bucket. P Colohan and Company Ltd was prosecuted after the death of construction supervisor John Walsh in 2004. It was also ordered to pay costs of £40,950 at the Old Bailey after pleading guilty to a breach of The Lifting Operations and Lifting Equipment Regulations 1998 (LOLER). The firm was a subcontractor responsible for preparing a concrete frame for a nine storey building. On 6 May 2004, four excavator buckets were being lifted by a crane to the front bucket of an excavator, which was parked adjacent to the site. A reinforced metal bar or 'rebar', usually used to reinforce concrete, had been threaded through the holes on top of two of the four buckets, all of which were placed together. A chain was hitched to the attachment pins of the other two buckets. Mr Walsh gave a hand signal and a verbal instruction via a radio to the driver of the crane to lift the weight. Workers on the first floor level say the load was then hoisted some three to six metres. Witnesses report the chains were jerking from side to side and the reinforced bar was not level. A

larger bucket fell off the bar striking John Walsh and causing him fatal head injuries. The HSE investigation found the lifting operation was not properly planned or executed. The company had not provided any specific risk assessments or method statements for the operation and had not taken sufficient steps to ensure that Mr Walsh was qualified to carry out this work. HSE inspector Simon Hester said: "This tragedy was avoidable. Critically, the employers failed to manage high risk activities effectively and failed to ensure that their staff were fully competent to carry out these tasks."

- [HSE news release.](#)

Director fined after teenager's death

A company director has been fined more than £7,000 at Nottingham Crown Court for health and safety breaches after an apprentice died at his workshop. Christopher John Pridmore, 32, was also ordered to pay £2,500 costs after admitted breaching the Provision and Use of Work Equipment Regulations 1998. A stack of MDF boards fell on Simon Murphy, 17, in November 2006. The nine boards each measured 8ft by 4ft and together weighed a quarter of a ton. Simon suffered serious head injuries and subsequently died in King's Mill Hospital. The teenager had been working at Chris Pridmore Joinery Ltd in Sutton-in-Ashfield when a newly fitted bracket failed to hold back the boards stacked on a work bench. Health and Safety Executive (HSE) inspector Maureen Kingman said: "The boards were stored on top of a bench in the workshop and fell because a bracket that was intended to restrain them was not strong enough to support their weight. The bracket failed after only a week in use." She added: "This was a tragic loss of a young life which could have been easily avoided. Mr Pridmore neglected to provide safe arrangements for the storage of sheets of MDF boards. The bracket, which had been produced to Mr Pridmore's design, posed inherent risk and its use as part of the storage system was ill-conceived. I hope other company directors can learn from this incident." In a statement, Simon's family said: "Simon is thought of and greatly missed every day by all his family. Whilst the loss of Simon is not lessened we are all pleased that the court case has been concluded and that we can 'draw a line' and continue our lives."

- [HSE news release.](#) [Nottingham Evening Post.](#) [BBC News Online.](#)

Worker's death costs metal firm £70,000

A Sheffield metal company has been fined £20,000 fine and ordered to pay £50,000 costs two years after a young worker died in an horrific fireball. Patrycjusz Handzel, 24, suffered 80 per cent burns in the explosion in March 2007 at Transition International, when his synthetic fibre top burned for 12 minutes at boiling point on his skin ([Risks 364](#)). The workplace novice was not wearing protective clothing and he had not received proper training. Sheffield Crown Court heard Mr Handzel suffered severe burns when the explosion occurred in an induction furnace melting ferro-titanium. The explosion was probably caused by water entering the furnace from

a contaminated drum of scrap material. At the time of the incident Mr Handzel, who came to Sheffield in 2006 from Poland, was wearing a hooded sports jacket made of synthetic material and jeans, rather than the recommended protective jacket and trousers. Health and Safety Executive (HSE) inspector Geoff Clark said: "This was an horrific incident which resulted in the needless death of a young worker who had worked at the company for only a few short weeks. Not only was there a lack of adequate procedures to ensure water or other dangerous contamination did not enter the furnace but, while it had indeed provided full personal protective equipment, the company had evidently taken no trouble to ensure it was being worn in practice." The inspector added: "Workers were not being given appropriate information, instruction and training on the dangers of working with molten metal and of the need to follow safe working practices. It is simply not good enough to pay lip service to safety in this way. Employers have a duty to ensure the health and safety of their workers and HSE will not hesitate to prosecute in situations where lives are put at risk."

- [HSE news release](#). [Sheffield Star](#). [Sheffield Telegraph](#).

New HSE website 'to prevent work stress'

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has unveiled a new stress website it says will help businesses prevent work-related stress. The new resource focuses on its stress management standards, which the safety watchdog says have already been used successfully by "many organisations." The resource includes six case histories, featuring three NHS trusts, a council, a utilities firm and a biscuit manufacturer. Peter Brown, head of HSE's health and work division, said: "Pressure is part and parcel of all work and helps to keep us motivated, but excessive pressure can lead to stress which undermines performance, is costly to employers and can make people ill." He added: "The revised stress management standards tools on the website can help any organisation successfully manage work-related stress. The standards highlight the components of good organisation, job design and management that keep stress levels in check and enhance productivity. In the current economic crisis businesses are looking to save where ever possible and managing work-related stress effectively could represent some significant savings." HSE says company directors and human resource managers need to take the lead on dealing with work-related stress.

- [HSE news release](#), [stress website](#) and related [case histories](#).

International News

Australia: Unions defend safety prosecutions role

Australia's occupational health and safety laws should include a trade union right to bring safety prosecutions against dangerous firms, a top union official has said. Geoff Fary, assistant secretary of the national union federation ACTU, was responding to the recommendations of a panel examining how to merge the country's state-based safety legislation into one nationwide law. Mr Fary said

the ACTU is still assessing the recommendations of the final review panel report, but said the occupational health and safety (OHS) harmonisation process "should not result in a reduction in protection of workers' entitlements or the rights of any group of workers." He highlighted one recommendation that would mean "it would no longer be open for unions to initiate prosecutions when regulators fail to do so." A system for union-initiated prosecutions already works well in New South Wales (NSW) and shouldn't be jettisoned, he said. ACTU's submission to the inquiry said there are several major benefits of the union's right-to-prosecute. It allows for the "efficient use of [expert] resources... calculated to bring about organisational and cultural change," it motivates trade unions to be active in OHS and it "has the potential to encourage employers to actively involve trade unions in the management of occupational health and safety concerns." He said prosecutions brought by unions in NSW have almost always been successful and have led to legislative change. These prosecutions have involved notable wins concerning the security of bank tellers, musculoskeletal injuries in stevedoring and burns to a worker from the spraying of hot cement. The union claims have been backed by researchers. Professor Michael Quinlan of the University of NSW said that the union influence on occupational health and safety in NSW has "historically been a positive force." Quinlan said: "Unions are not using this power frivolously, as has been suggested. Historically, they have launched fewer than 20 cases and have won virtually every case they have run. One of the reasons we have security barriers for tellers in banks today is a result of a case pursued by the Finance Sector Union" ([Risks 250](#)).

- [Business Spectator. Safety at Work interview with Geoff Fary. ACTU OHS webpages, including links to ACTU submission.](#)

Canada: Alberta probes work cancer link

Alberta's growing number of work-related fatalities is just the tip of the iceberg, government and health officials have acknowledged, as they prepare to uncover how many cancer deaths are linked to on-the-job exposure to toxic chemicals. The Alberta Cancer Board is teaming up with the Canadian province's government to develop a new long-term strategy to track and prevent deadly occupational diseases. Dr Fred Ashbury, the province's vice-president responsible for population health, said international research suggests up to 20 per cent of cancer deaths are associated with exposures to harmful chemicals at work. Based on that estimate, Alberta's occupational cancers could have accounted for 1,140 deaths in 2006, when 5,700 Albertans succumbed to cancer. "It's a big problem. It's an international problem," Ashbury said. "Because we can actually prevent these cancers from occurring - if we know exactly where they are and what exposures people are facing, we have an obligation to do something." The province's Employment and Immigration department is overseeing the plan to create an occupational disease unit and to develop, with the Alberta Cancer Board, a new strategy to track and prevent workers' exposure to dangerous chemicals. The unit is expected to start up in April. Bob Barnetson, an assistant labour relations professor at Athabasca University, said it's too early to tell whether the Alberta government's plan to prevent occupational diseases will work. He said unless the province pairs education with extra enforcement and an increased cost to employers who expose workers to toxins, the

initiative is likely to achieve little. Barnetson also said limits on safe exposure levels to carcinogens may need tightening. "People keep getting sick and dying because of their work and there's no real mechanism to address that and stop that," he said. "They are invisible, these type of injuries, because they take so long to show up."

- [Calgary Herald](#).

Global: ConocoPhillips sued by cancer victims

Dozens of Norwegians, whose health was ruined working on the North Sea's Ekofisk oilfield, are to take the giant oil company ConocoPhillips to court in the US. They believe the US multinational acted irresponsibly by not ensuring necessary maintenance and protection against chemicals which have resulted in cancer and other serious health problems. Texan law firm Arnold & Itkin LLP believes that the Norwegian oil workers have a strong case. It intends to demonstrate the connection between the health problems and the hazardous working environment on the Ekofisk field.

"ConocoPhillips is an enormous company with astonishing amounts of money," commented lawyer Lisa Sechelski. "Parting with ten million dollars would not be a big enough punishment for them. This is a company which every year budgets millions of dollars to allow for fines it incurs through illegal conduct. This company plans to break the law." At a series of meetings arranged by the law firm in Norway last year, 100 sick oil workers filled in questionnaires, signed papers relating to the lawsuit and presented their health records. Lisa Sechelski told a Norwegian newspaper she knows what is needed to get ConocoPhillips to take notice. "ConocoPhillips only remedies a situation once it has been caught. The amounts of money involved must make this company think twice. Otherwise it will simply continue to send people out into a working environment which will kill them." Several widows of former Ekofisk workers are participating in the lawsuit. "ConocoPhillips is constantly breaking the law," said Lisa Sechelski. "The lack of toxicity monitoring on the Ekofisk field is a contravention of the law. The company shows no care for the lives of its workers and has not taken the necessary steps to protect them. This has cost people their lives. There are also women here who have lost their husbands."

- [Dagbladet.no](#)

Global: Warning on chemical cancers risk

A major report has warned that the global cancer burden has doubled in a generation and that too little attention is paid to potential occupational and environmental risks. The International Agency for Research on Cancer published its World Cancer Report 2008 last month. It says the global burden of cancer doubled during the last 30 years of the 20th century. In 2008, it is estimated that worldwide there were over 12 million new cases of cancer diagnosed, 7 million deaths from cancer and 25 million persons alive with cancer within five years of diagnosis. The report warns of the "the potential cancer burden from exposure to hundreds of

probable and possible human carcinogens that have been identified and from thousands of new chemicals that have not been tested for their cancer potential. Little is known about risks from combinations of exposures at levels found in the environment or from exposures during critical time windows of development or in susceptible populations." It also warns that the nature of exposures in the working and wider environment is rarely simple. "Cancers may have multiple causes, so that environmental factors may contribute to cancers that are attributed to occupational or lifestyle factors. The known interactions between radon and smoking or between asbestos and smoking support the idea that individual cancers may have multiple causes. Finally, it is important to remember that environmental pollution is not only a cancer problem. Much environmental pollution can be prevented, and reducing environmental pollution can contribute to reductions in diseases other than cancer and to increases in aesthetics and in the overall quality of life."

- [World Cancer Report 2008](#), WHO/IARC [[pdf](#)]. [IARC news release](#).

USA: Obama backs safety enforcement

Barak Obama has pledged to increase the enforcement of workplace safety. The US president said mounting workloads and dwindling staff have hindered the government's ability to protect workers. Obama's budget blueprint, released last week, seeks to increase funding to the official safety watchdog, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). The proposed funding increase for 2010 would enable OSHA to "vigorously enforce workplace safety laws and whistleblower protections, and ensure the safety and health of American workers," the budget proposal says. The extra money also would be used to increase enforcement of wage and hour rules, including child labour violations. "After eight years of neglect, President Obama's strong commitment to additional resources to ensure the health and safety of American workers is a breath of fresh air," said George Miller, the chair of the House Education and Labor Committee. There is a lot of neglect to undo. The number of federal OSHA compliance officers has dropped by about 35 per cent since 1980, even though employment has risen dramatically. Nationally, OSHA agencies inspect only about 1 per cent of all workplaces each year. "Over time, the agency has just been eroded," said Peg Seminario, safety director of the national union federation AFL-CIO. "The consequence is that we've fallen further and further behind on addressing serious workplace health and safety problems." In a \$410 billion appropriations bill before Congress to fund the current fiscal year, there is a \$27 million increase to the agency's budget, taking the total OSHA budget to \$513 million. The bill dictates that the increase be used to rebuild OSHA's enforcement.

- [Charlotte Observer](#).

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