Most people have probably never heard of mesothelioma unless they know of someone who has suffered from it, but it is a form of cancer of the external lining of the lung. It is caused by exposure to asbestos and invariably fatal. The latest Health and Safety Executive report shows that, for the third year running, the number of deaths from mesothelioma has been over 2,500 and this level is likely to continue for at least the rest of the decade.

Since 1968 when figures first became available, the total for the number of people who are recorded as having died from mesothelioma in the past 46 years is 54,631. Given the high levels of under-diagnosis in previous decades, the true figure is much higher.

The importation and use of asbestos was banned in the UK in 1999 so we are now told that mesothelioma is soon going to become a disease of the past. Well it is not. There are still millions of tonnes of it in place in at least half a million commercial properties, and every day thousands of workers are put at risk of breathing in the fatal fibre.

Whenever any kind of maintenance work is done on a building where there is asbestos it puts everyone at risk. A survey of 500 tradespeople for the HSE showed that less than a third were aware of the correct ways to deal with and handle asbestos in the workplace and only 15% knew that asbestos could still be found in buildings built up to the year 2000.

According to the HSE, 1.3 million tradespeople such as carpenters and joiners could come into contact with asbestos at least 100 times a year, with few workers knowing whether the deadly material is present in buildings which they are working on. Millions of shop workers, office workers, teachers, and hospital workers are also at risk as they work in buildings riddled with asbestos.

The need for effective ongoing action and support for those who develop mesothelioma was recognised by the TUC and major trade unions in the region, leading to the formation of the Northern TUC Asbestos Support & Campaign Group in 2012.

The Group is a partnership between the Northern TUC, trade unions, West View Advice & Resource Centre Ltd and Macmillan Cancer Support. It offers FREE, confidential information, advice and support to anyone with an asbestos related or industrial disease in the North East and North Cumbria.

**Visit** [**http://www.ascg.org.uk/**](http://www.ascg.org.uk/) **to find out more.**

The TUC and unions have also called for increased funding into mesothelioma research, both for treatments to assist those who develop it and how to prevent its development. On average Mesothelioma patients die within a year of their diagnosis and in contrast to many other cancers, treatments for mesothelioma are limited. However the government have recently given £5 million to establish a new National Mesothelioma Centre.

Trade unions have been instrumental in getting the government to ensure that any person who contracts mesothelioma as a result of their work gets full compensation and already tens of millions of pounds have been paid out as a result.

Beth Farhat, Regional Secretary Northern TUC