

3.11 Deputy J.A. Hilton of St. Helier of the Chief Minister regarding the management of asbestos within public buildings:

Is the Chief Minister satisfied that all States departments are fulfilling their legal obligations under the law when dealing with the management of asbestos within the public buildings they occupy?

Senator I.J. Gorst (The Chief Minister):

The States Employment Board is aware of its responsibilities under the Health and Safety at Work (Jersey) Law 1989 and the Code of Practice on the management of exposure to asbestos in the workplace. All States buildings have either been surveyed or are in the process of being surveyed. Higher risk materials have either been removed or where it is considered safe have been left in place. Their condition is then monitored to prevent further exposure. There is an asbestos register for each building that contains asbestos plus a specific plan for the management and monitoring of any materials left in place. In order to ensure that any asbestos registers, management plans and safety controls are working effectively, relevant States departments are currently undergoing an asbestos audit to ensure that they have effective arrangements in place and are compliant with the law and the relevant Codes of Practice.

3.11.1 Deputy J.A. Hilton:

Can the Chief Minister tell Members, if Property Holdings have responsibility for all public buildings, do they have an asbestos specialist within their department?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I am not aware whether they do or they do not but that is not what is required. What is required is that they would bring in experts to make sure that these services are undertaken. Where asbestos is found to be that they then have an appropriate management plan, that they have a risk register and that all staff who use the building are aware of what to do in emergency situations, but also in an everyday situation, and that is the important thing.

3.11.2 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Although strictly perhaps the Minister for Health and Social Services' concern; could the Chief Minister outline whether the research has extended to seeing whether there is a pattern, for example, of illnesses in a location which is known to have a high concentration of asbestos.

Senator I.J. Gorst:

As the Deputy well knows, even before he stood up to ask the question, that is not something that either the Chief Minister or the Minister, I think, would be qualified to say; that is a medical question. What I should say, and what is important and what was raised by the recent inquest, is that this is an issue which the public, employees and employers need to take seriously. The misuse or the mis-interaction with asbestos over a period of time can have serious health implications and, therefore, it is important that the issue is raised in the minds of the public that employers take seriously their responsibility under the law and comply with the codes of practice which are in place.

3.11.3 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Just a supplementary: I accept the Chief Minister would not directly know this, but has he received medical advice on the matter?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

Again, I do not think the Deputy would expect me to answer the question in the way that he wishes it to be answered. The important thing is that employers, of which the States is the largest in the Island, complies with their obligations under the law and complies with what they are required to do in the codes of practice. I am grateful to the Deputy for raising this question today, because it is very important that the public is aware of the issues involved with asbestos.

3.11.4 Deputy J.A. Hilton:

The Director of Health and Safety in an interview recently described the management of asbestos in the Island as “appalling.” I am a little disappointed to hear the Chief Minister say that buildings currently under the States of Jersey have either been surveyed or are being surveyed, which leads me to believe that the relevant department has been a little bit slow off the mark. That, I do find disappointing. What measures does the Chief Minister think the States can make to encourage the responsible handling of the management of asbestos by contractors and owners of buildings?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I sort of lost the actual question. I appreciate the comments the Deputy made in her opening of the question, but what was the actual question?

The Bailiff:

It was right at the end, Deputy.

Deputy J.A. Hilton:

Yes. The question is: what measures does the Chief Minister think the States can make to encourage the responsible handling of asbestos by contractors and owners of buildings?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

That is a very good question and the States as an employer has responsibilities, and I have spoken about those in my opening answers, and that is making sure that we comply with the law, that all surveys are undertaken and that appropriate management plans are in place, risk registers, and staff are fully aware of what their responsibilities are and how to deal with buildings where asbestos might be present. I think that this is a difficult area. The Inspector of Health and Safety wants to, and is keen to, ensure that there is a public awareness campaign and he is absolutely right to do that. I would say to employees who are concerned today, that they should look at the law, that they should look at the Code of Practice and, if they have any concerns whatsoever, they should leave the area and bring it to the attention of their responsible manager. This is a serious issue that employees on the Island must take seriously. There is a law in place, the Codes of Practice are straightforward, but the implications for health where it is not handled appropriately are severe.

The Bailiff:

I think you have made that point, Chief Minister. Thank you.