

Asbestos in Germany – From the First BG Rules to 30 Years of the Central Registration Agency for Employees Exposed to Asbestos Dust ("ZAs")

In Germany, where asbestos-related diseases (asbestoses) had been included in the register of occupational diseases since 1 April 1937, the institutes for statutory accident insurance and prevention ("BGs" for short) issued their first rules aimed at combating asbestos dust on 1 August 1940. Efforts in this sphere were then interrupted by the Second World War and the reconstruction phase following the war. At the beginning of the 1970s, the statutory accident insurance institutions, whose awareness of the issue had been heightened due to cancer risks caused by asbestos exposure, established far-reaching measures which ultimately led to the government adopting a comprehensive asbestos ban in 1993.

Perhaps the most significant secondary preventive measure was the establishment, in 1972, of the Central Registration Agency for Employees Exposed to Asbestos Dust ("ZAs"), in which 63 accident-insurance institutions now collaborate. The ZAs registers data concerning individuals' exposure to asbestos, organises occupational health screenings, especially after exposure and upon retirement, and archives medical data for scientific research. Quality assurance for the occupational health examinations, in close consultation with the German Federation of Institutions for Statutory Accident Insurance and Prevention (HVBG) and its committees of experts from medical science and practice, is an ongoing task.

As at 31.12.2002, there were 479,451 workers registered at the ZAs, of whom 62,200 were undergoing occupational health screening as they were still exposed to asbestos (in demolition and redevelopment work) and 229,300 because of past asbestos exposure. Data is available from 46,900 companies on asbestos production and use. The accident-insurance institutions or the companies report all relevant cases, i.e. all employees who have been exposed to asbestos for a total of more than three months, for inclusion in the register. The database grows every year (reports of persons involved in asbestos clean-ups and employees who were exposed to asbestos a long time ago).

The expected further rise in these diseases and ever better medical findings regarding early diagnosis and treatment of cancers will continue to challenge the ZAs in terms of social policy, expertise and logistics in the next 15 to 20 years too.