

Media Release

Friday 28th Nov 2008

Shocking figures on asbestos in workplaces and employer ignorance of safety regulations

In Asbestos Awareness Week, Unions have released a survey of asbestos in 326 workplaces across Tasmania conducted by their members. 43% of the sites surveyed contained asbestos and frighteningly, a further 38% of employers surveyed did not know if there was asbestos present in the workplaces they are accountable for.

Only 51% of the sites surveyed had an asbestos register or management plan as they are obliged to do under the Regulations and 9% of those could not easily locate their register.

As a result of these shocking figures Unions are calling on the State Government to act now to create a central office for asbestos registers and to fund an Asbestos Awareness Week education program each year.

The survey covers all types of workplaces from domestic dwellings to offices, factories, supermarkets, warehouses, foundries, schools, hospitals and weaving mills.

It's been ten years since regulations on asbestos in workplaces came into effect in Tasmania. A decade on, the survey results show that progress toward complying with these regulations is totally inadequate. In some cases registers had been made years ago but not updated.

Of the 80 State Schools surveyed 69% had asbestos. 95% of these schools could produce an asbestos register, however 55% of them did not appear to have regularly maintained that register as they are obliged to under the regulations.

Unions Tasmania Secretary Simon Cocker said:

"Because employers don't have to lodge their register with Workplace Standards, clearly many of them are just not fulfilling their obligations under the Workplace Health and Safety Act and may be putting their employees at risk of exposure to asbestos."

"A central, publicly accessible registry also has advantages for people buying businesses. They would be able to easily obtain a copy of the registers rather than going to the expense of creating new ones when they buy."

"A central registry would also instantly give us a map of how much asbestos there is in our workplaces, what the products are and what condition they are in. Workplace Standards could then monitor compliance."

"We found some truly illogical instances where registers apparently exist but could not be accessed because they are on file in a company or departmental head office. The whole idea of an asbestos register is that it can be accessed by workers and tradespeople coming on site so that they can avoid exposure. If the register is in the archives or on a computer which requires password access, how can it be useful to a tradesperson about to drill into an asbestos wall?"

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Secretary: Simon Cocker

"We've got major State Government departments that have made minimal progress on this vital health and safety issue. One department had only managed to comply in about 9% of its worksites. At the rate they're going it would take a century to meet their obligations."

"It's great that 95% of our State Schools have a register but disturbing that the Education Department has not monitored this to ensure that all schools have an up-to-date register. 55% of the State Schools surveyed did not appear to have updated their registers since 2000 or 2002. That's too long. Our kids and school staff deserve better protection."

Unions are not claiming this as a scientific study. Simon Cocker said:

"The true figures are probably much worse. If this is the state of compliance to the asbestos regulations in larger unionized workplaces and government departments, it is frightening to think how bad the situation must be if you surveyed smaller and medium sized businesses as well."

"It is the employer's obligation under the Act not only to develop an asbestos management plan but to make sure workers know about it and are trained accordingly."

The survey results also show that there is confusion among employers about buildings constructed after asbestos products were banned and others who lease their premises.

"There are plenty of true stories about asbestos having to be removed from buildings constructed in the 1990s. Having a modern building is not enough to excuse an employer from taking all reasonable steps to meet their obligations under the Act."

"Being a tenant in a building does not let an employer off the hook."

While the overall figures are highly worrying, some workplaces like our Catholic Schools, Hobart City Council, the University of Tasmania and others have clearly taken their responsibilities under the Act very seriously and have comprehensive asbestos management plans.

Unions Tasmania, Secretary Simon Cocker said:

"Some of our members reported that they were really impressed by how thorough their employer had been in dealing with this issue."

Asbestos Awareness Week is recognised in other states and countries as the last week in November. At present there are no Asbestos Awareness Week activities in Tasmania.

"With the growing concern in the community about asbestos in their homes and workplaces it is time to get serious about asbestos awareness and education. We need the Government to fund an education and awareness program." said Mr Cocker.

Health and safety regulation in Tasmania requires an Accountable Person who has management or control of a building, structure or mine which is a workplace to take all reasonable steps to identify asbestos on site, maintain a register of asbestos and regularly check the condition of that asbestos. Where the asbestos needs to be removed it must be done by a licensed asbestos remover.

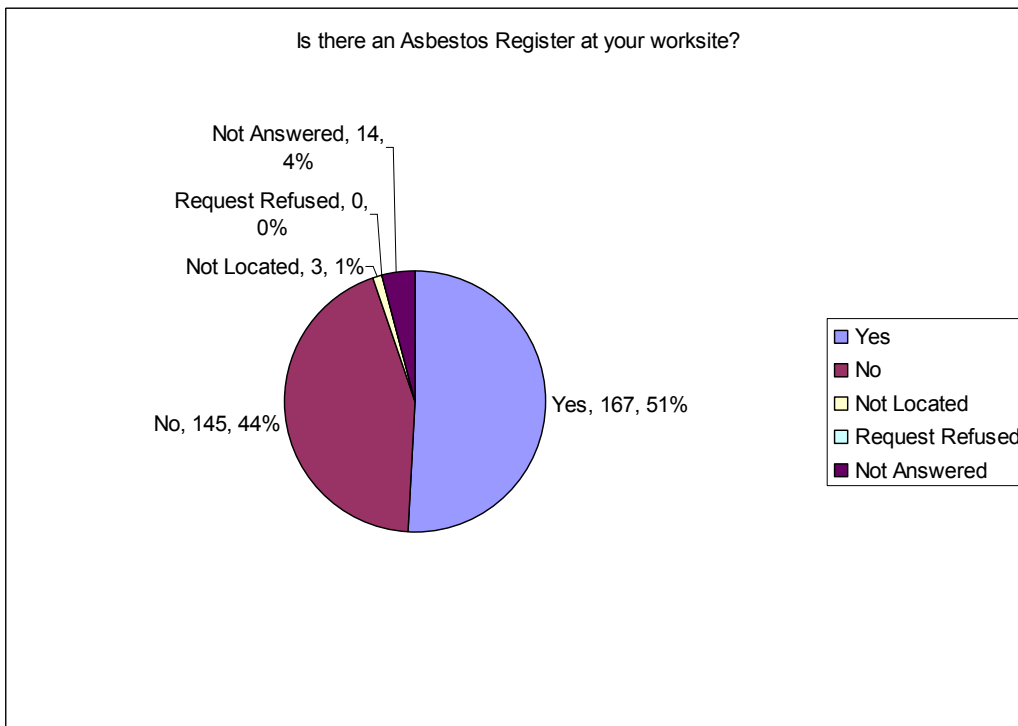
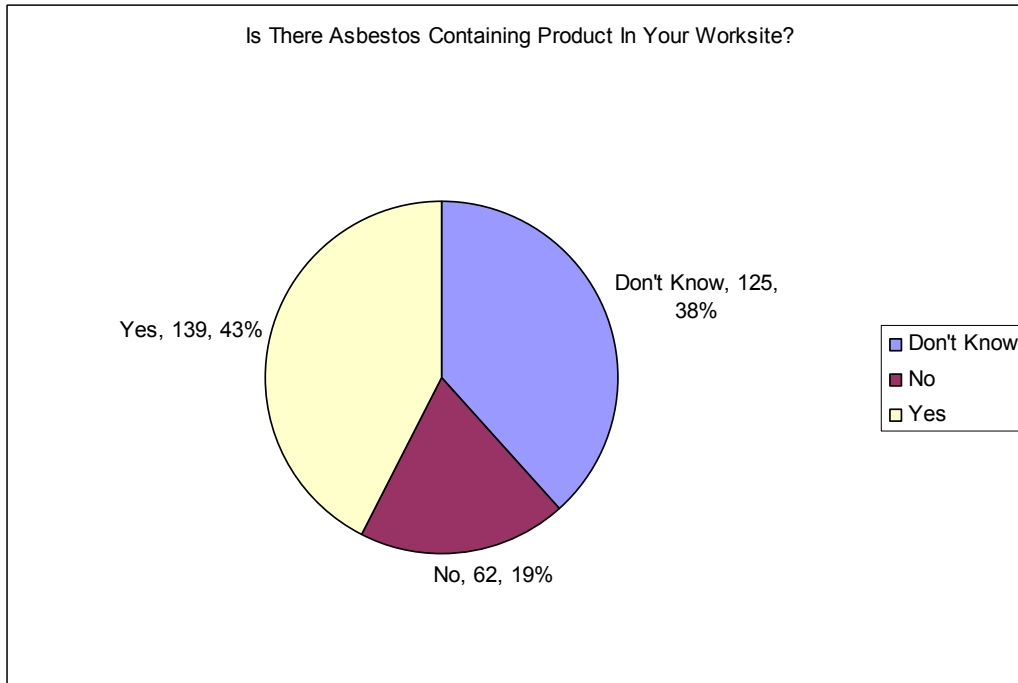
The regulations can be viewed at:

http://www.wst.tas.gov.au/safety_comply/dang_subs/asbestos/management

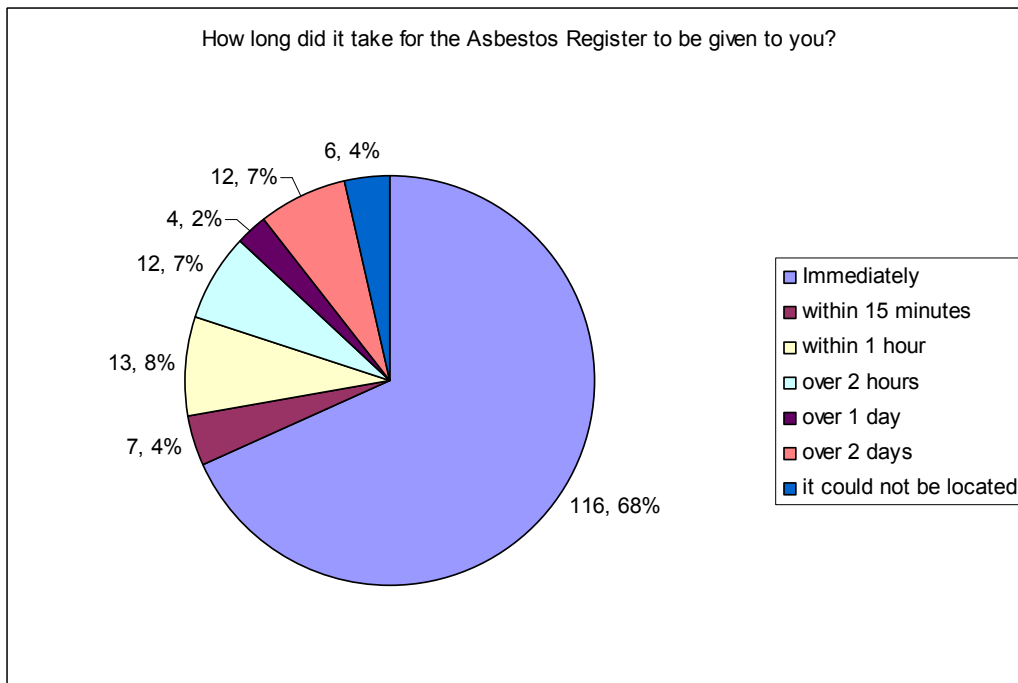
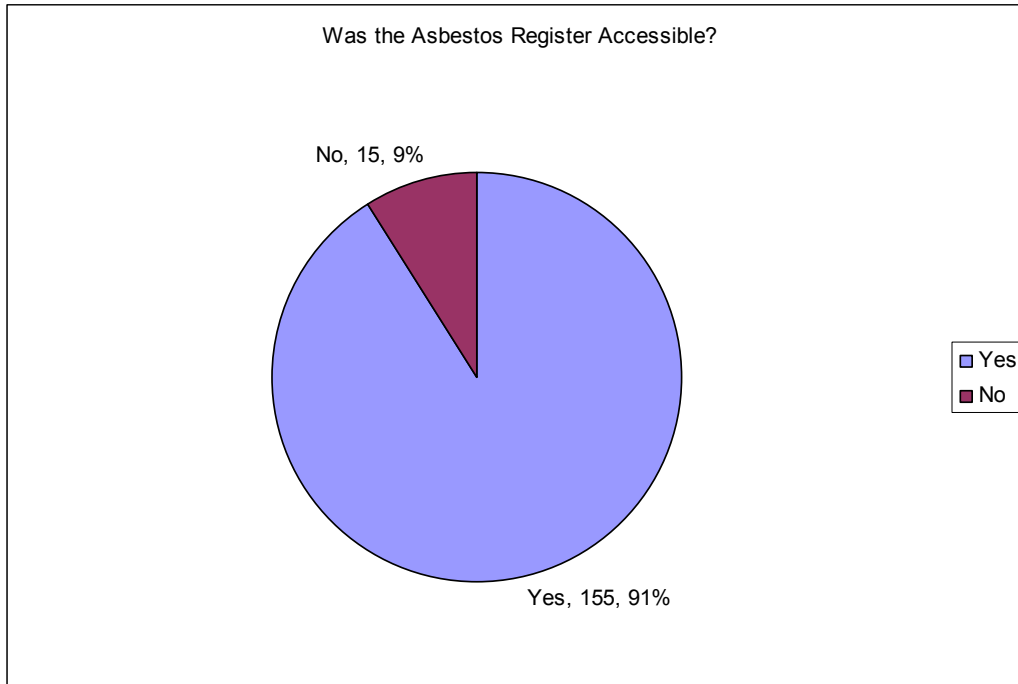
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2008 Asbestos Registers Survey Results

326 sites across Tasmania



170 Sites that had an Asbestos Register



Unions Tasmania Asbestos Registers Survey results 2008

