

ESMO Feedback - Proposal for revising the Asbestos at Work Directive

The European Society for Medical Oncology (ESMO), as the leading professional organisation for medical oncology representing more than 28,000 oncology professionals from over 160 countries worldwide, welcomes the efforts of the European Commission to address the health-related risks stemming from asbestos by proposing to revise the Asbestos at Work Directive.

As part of its mission to reduce the burden of cancer on society and improve cancer control, ESMO is committed to supporting the development of robust EU-wide measures aimed at preventing new cancer cases. In this regard, given that asbestos, in all forms, is a proven carcinogenic substance that caused an estimated 71,750 deaths in the EU27 in 2019 due to occupational exposure, it is important that further strict measures are put in place to protect workers. Likewise, with additional significant deaths occurring through non-occupational (domestic) exposure it is important to also recognize that such domestic exposure remains a significant problem across the EU.

ESMO believes that the proposal put forward by the Commission to lower the existing Occupational Exposure Limit (OEL) to asbestos to 10,000 fibres per m³ (0.01 fibres per cm³) represents a step in the right direction. However, given that asbestos remains a major contributor to work-related cancers in Europe, and is responsible for an estimated 78% of occupational cancers recognised in EU countries (EODS data), we would like to stress the importance of adopting an even more ambitious limit of 1,000 fibres per m³ (0.001 fibres per cm³), with an attendant benefit upon Europe's health.

Such action would be supported by the European Chemicals Agency's (ECHA) February 2021 Scientific Report on Asbestos, which clearly demonstrates the link between higher air concentration of asbestos and an increased excess life-time cancer risk for certain cancers. Moreover, it would also be in line with the European Parliament's Resolution of October 2021 on "Protecting workers from asbestos" which calls for the exposure limit to be set at 0.001 fibres per cm³. Lastly, further lowering the current OEL is also an important requisite for achieving the goals of Europe's Beating Cancer Plan (BCP), which correctly highlights that prevention is the most cost-efficient long-term cancer control strategy.



In addition, and noting that the current asbestos fibre limit is 0.1 per cm³ in both the United Kingdom and the United States of America, such a move would further cement the EU's position in the vanguard of global public health and, encourage other legislators to adopt similarly progressive measures.

The revision of the Asbestos at Work Directive is of crucial importance for improving efforts to prevent cancer in Europe. As such, ESMO stands ready to collaborate with the EU institutions throughout the legislative process and offers to mobilise its network of medical oncologists, health professionals and researchers to support the development of robust measures for addressing the impact of asbestos.

For further information, please contact: publicpolicy@esmo.org