

ASBESTOS — HOME OWNERS

Statement

HON MATTHEW SWINBOURN (East Metropolitan) [5.18 pm]: I rise today to speak about an issue that is placing many Western Australians at risk. Indeed, many of those people may not even be aware that they are at risk. That issue is asbestos in the home. Although for many years asbestos as a building material has largely been out of use in Australia, there are still many homes that were built before the ban on asbestos building materials was introduced in the 1980s. We therefore need to continue to contain asbestos, as it sits there like a ticking time bomb. In the area I represent—East Metropolitan Region—there are still many homes in the suburbs of Gosnells, Armadale, Thornlie, Midland, Mt Lawley, Guildford and Bassendean that were built at the height of the use of asbestos as a building material. By way of example, the home that my nanna built in Armadale in the 1960s, after she had migrated to Australia from the United Kingdom, has an asbestos roof. That roof, fortunately, has been sealed, but it remains an ever-present danger if it is disturbed.

Left undisturbed, asbestos is often harmless, but if it is disturbed during demolition, maintenance or renovation work, the risk is greatly increased. That is why awareness of asbestos is very important. This month, for those who do not know, is Asbestos Awareness Month. It is vitally important that we get behind the campaign to raise the subject of the risk of asbestos in the home. It is estimated that one in three Australian homes still contain asbestos. Although this is a high number, it does not of itself mean that one in three homes is presently putting people's lives at risk. The real danger is that it is often very difficult—even impossible—to tell which homes and which materials inside those homes contain the dangerous substance. Therefore, the point of this campaign is to make people aware that the danger could be anywhere, and that only by bringing in a professional and qualified testing service can home owners and renovators be sure of their risk.

Many Western Australians have a do-it-yourself spirit, and the great Australian dream of home ownership is often linked with a certain pride in doing things around the home without the help of professionals. Although that is admirable, there are a number of instances when do-it-yourself is a hazard and work should be left to the professionals. Electrical work is an obvious example of something that should be left to professionals, and asbestos is another. The difference is that although most people know of the hazards of electricity because they are often self-evident, fewer people are aware of the dangers of asbestos and are often not even aware of its presence in their home. There is no safe level of asbestos exposure, and diseases associated with exposure often take many years to present. For this reason we often overlook the risk of asbestos exposure because the consequences are not immediately visible. Although the use of asbestos as a building material has decreased in recent decades—unless, of course, a children's hospital is being built—rates of asbestosis and mesothelioma are expected to rise. We must be vigilant, aware and not averse to bringing in professionals to assess and manage the risk when we are unsure.

Of course, the risk is greatly increased for tradies who work on domestic properties. Bricklayers, carpenters, electricians, landscapers, plumbers, roofers, tilers and painters, to name a few, often face the risks of undiscovered asbestos. They should all be aware of the dangers and given the proper training. It is a worker's issue and a worker's safety issue, and it is incredibly important for workers and contractors to recognise the risks and warning signs. Engaging licensed asbestos removal contractors is always the best solution in any situation where there may be a hazard.

The message is simple: do not play renovation roulette. If you suspect there may be asbestos present, get the materials tested. Do not cut it, do not drill it, do not drop it, do not sand it, do not saw it, do not scrape it, do not scrub it, do not dismantle it, do not tip it, do not water blast it, do not demolish it, and whatever you do, do not dump it. I encourage members to support Asbestos Awareness Month. I am supporting it. I will be hosting a blue lamington morning tea later this month, and I will invite my guests to make a small donation to asbestos-related charities, and I hope all members also have the opportunity to do that.

The PRESIDENT: I might just add that we will be doing the same type of event here at Parliament House on 29 November, and I encourage all of you to participate in due course.