



Naturally occurring asbestos – an Australian health hazard

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A new study begins this month, aiming to map naturally occurring asbestos (NOA) in Australia and investigate the health risks posed by the cancer causing substance.

In an article published in the current issue of The Australian Geologist (TAG), produced by the Australian Geological Society, Marc Hendrickx explains the need for research into the potential health risk of NOA in Australia.

“Asbestos is one of the few natural substances known to cause cancer, including lung cancer and malignant mesothelioma. While risks associated with asbestos exposure in occupational settings are well known and managed; the risks of exposure from natural sources has been largely overlooked,” explains Mr Hendrickx.

His research, in the Graduate School of the Environment at Macquarie University, hopes to ascertain if NOA has caused malignant mesothelioma in Australia and will also include new maps, showing the distribution of NOA bearing rocks throughout the country.

“NOA refers to fibrous minerals in rocks and soil that can be released into the air if disturbed by human activities or weathering processes.” Growing evidence now exists; showing that exposure to NOA may increase the risk of developing malignant mesothelioma.

Hendrickx suggests that long term exposure to low levels of asbestos released from natural deposits could help explain some of the cases of malignant mesothelioma in Australia with no documented asbestos exposure.

NOA deposits are found in each Australian State. The larger deposits of asbestos were mined last century but there are also small deposits that were not economic to mine that could pose a health risk if disturbed.

In Tasmania asbestos deposits are associated with the rock: serpentinite. Serpentinite commonly contains low levels of chrysotile and sometimes tremolite asbestos and narrow belts of asbestos bearing serpentinite were mined in the Beaconsfield district in the last century. Other deposits occur near Zeehan and along the shores of Macquarie Harbour.

“Information about the location of asbestos deposits is generally not well known by the public so there is a danger that small deposits could be accidentally disturbed during construction, farming or forestry. One of the outcomes of the project will be to develop maps showing the location of NOA so that the risks of disturbance can be reduced.”

As part of the study air quality monitoring and sampling will also be undertaken in affected areas to determine the levels and types of asbestos present so that appropriate measures can be developed to reduce the risks. The study will also examine cancer registry data to ascertain whether NOA has contributed to cases of malignant mesothelioma in Australia.

The GSA is a member based organisation that strives to promote, advance and support Earth Sciences in Australia. The society aims to create an awareness of the essential part that Earth sciences play in the management of Australia’s natural resources for the benefit of all.

For more information, images and to organise an interview, please contact:

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