Asbestos found on Glendowie coastline

A public meeting to address concerns of local residents and environmental groups about asbestos-containing material found on the Glendowie foreshore was held at Glendowie Bowling Club.

This potentially deadly material has been discovered on 10 beaches on Tāmaki Estuary, centred on Glendowie Beach/ Roberta Avenue foreshore, and also at Karaka Bay, Andersons Bay, Wai-o-Taiki Bay, Dunkirk Bay and Panmure Wharf.

The meeting on May 29 was hosted by the Tāmaki Estuary Protection Society with support from the St Heliers-Glendowie Residents' Association and Ōrākei Local Board (OLB), as well as the Asbestos Awareness Trust and Mesothelioma Support. Troy Churton and Margaret Voyce represented the OLB, and Tāmaki MP Brooke van Velden attended.

It aimed to inform the public on asbestos risk and its prevalence along our coastline, and explain what Auckland Council and interest groups can do to make our environment safer.

An independent asbestos expert, AUT Associate Professor Terry Ann Berry, outlined the six different types of asbestos, including the most common white asbestos, once promoted as safe, of which 200 million tonnes were produced and used in 2000 products. Its flame-retardant properties saw it used for cladding, roofing and fibro-cement, and even ironing boards and brake pads. Asbestos was frequently used for special effects in Hollywood films; for example, the "snow" in The Wizard of Oz is not snow — it's asbestos, she said.

Cheap and readily available, asbestos was widely used as a fire-retardant around boilers and pipes between 1950 and 1979. Asbestos-containing fibrolite board and fibre-cement roofing materials is present in many New Zealand houses built between the mid-1940s and the 1980s. "Any [New Zealand] home built before 2000 is likely to contain asbestos," Dr Berry said.

Asbestos is now banned in 72 countries including, since 2016, New Zealand.

But the effects of inhaling sharp, needle-like particles of asbestos are still showing up — often many decades after exposure — in cases of asbestosis and malignant mesothelioma (an incurable aggressive form of cancer).

Between 1958 and 2001 there were 1696 deaths in New Zealand caused by malignant mesothelioma. In the last 30 years, diagnoses of asbestos-related illnesses have doubled, with 220 deaths each year in New Zealand, making it our Number 1 workplace killer. Dr Berry's message: Find out what is in your home.

Robert McAllister, from the Faulty of Asbestos Management of Australia and New Zealand, said asbestos products in good condition were not an immediate threat. It was when asbestos products were dry and broken up that they became dangerous because tiny fibres could become airborne and easily breathed in. Asbestos-containing material was less dangerous if it was wet in sea water or mudflats. But when small particles were washed up on the beach and dried out, they were dangerous. Children were at risk if they unknowingly picked up small, dry ACM pieces and disturbed the fibres. There was no safe level of asbestos exposure, he said.

“In Australia the approach is to remove all asbestos. In New Zealand it is to manage and monitor. Awareness is important -- to know quantities and locations.”

Whilst asbestos is no longer going into New Zealand homes, tradies and home renovators were potentially at risk when demolishing or renovating old homes and buildings containing asbestos products. Waterblasting a fibrolite roof was a particularly risky job, he said. “Don’t do it.”

Julie Chambers, chair of Tāmaki Estuary Protection Society (TEPS) said the main concern of residents was that “we want to be sure that when our children and grandchildren play on the beach they are not picking up pieces of asbestos.”

Mark Townshend, head of project specialisation at Auckland Council, said most of the asbestos-containing material found around the Auckland coastline is from builders’ rubble dumped over banks and cliff edges to avoid paying for disposal. He said he and his team would do daily monitoring and observing, as well as regular clean-ups. They would respond to residents’ reports of asbestos contamination and would also collaborate with local environmental groups doing beach and foreshore clean-ups.

Don’t try to remove the asbestos yourself, he advised. Instead provide the Council with an exact location so that his team can collect it safely. The phone number to report ACM is: 09 3010101.

—Story by Jan Power (EBSP)