Asbestos disease projections too low

April 2 2007

Current predictions of the future incidence of asbestos-related disease have been substantially underestimated, according to new modelling to be presented in Melbourne today by an epidemiologist from The Australian National University.

The analysis by Dr Mark Clements, from the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health, and colleagues shows that the peak number of cases of mesothelioma, a deadly cancer caused by asbestos, will occur four years later and the future total incidence may be in excess of 35 per cent higher than existing models would have predicted. The pattern for mesothelioma reflects changes in asbestos exposure and therefore reflects predictions for all asbestos-related diseases, Dr Clements said.

These early results have important implications for asbestos-related disease liability schemes, Dr Clements said, although more detailed work is needed to properly integrate other factors related to the actuarial implications.

According to the research, an existing model developed by the auditing firm KPMG gave the peak of mesothelioma cases as occurring in 2010, with 3530 cases in New South Wales men. However, Dr Clements said their own epidemiological model showed that the peak could occur as late as 2017 and see 6430 cases of the deadly disease in NSW men.

“There is reasonable evidence that the peak of mesothelioma incidence is later than 2010. This has far reaching consequences for actuarial

predictions, where the number of cases out to 2060 may be in excess of 35 per cent higher than the number predicted by KPMG's model," he said.

"It is unclear why the two models give different results. The KPMG modeling may have been influenced by a common belief that peak incidence would be in 2010; in contrast, our epidemiological model is able to predict the peak for incidence."

"Although these results have implications for liability, there are several steps between predicting mesothelioma incidence and calculating liability," he said. "Moreover, modelling would be required for other asbestos-related diseases.

"I can't speculate as to the revised level of liability. However based on our modelling of future mesothelioma incidence it's worrying that the liability may have been under-estimated," Dr Clements said.

Dr Clements will present this paper at the Accident Compensation Seminar, hosted by the Institute of Actuaries of Australia, in Melbourne today.

Source: Research Australia