

COMMITTEE ON CARCINOGENICITY OF CHEMICALS IN FOOD, CONSUMER PRODUCTS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

Relative Vulnerability of Children to Asbestos compared to Adults – WATCH position Statement and HSE view on the Risk Assessment by the Netherlands.

1. The Department for Education (DfE) has asked for advice from the COC on the vulnerability of children to asbestos to inform the discussions of its independent “Asbestos in Schools Steering Group”.

2. The Health and Safety Executive’s scientific advisory committee, the Working Group on Action to Control Chemicals (WATCH), which advises the Advisory Committee on Toxic Substances (ACTS) and HSE on scientific and technical issues relating to the assessment and control of health risks from chemicals, has recently examined the risks from low level exposure to asbestos in adults. It concluded that a definitive numerical value could not be placed on the risks from low level asbestos exposure and stated that “the risk will be lower, the lower the exposure, but “safe” thresholds are not identifiable”. Therefore, the COC secretariat considered that it would be impossible to advise on the absolute risk of asbestos in children, for whom there are far fewer data. It was agreed with DfE and DH that the COC would be asked to advise on the relative vulnerability of children to asbestos compared to adults.

3. At the July meeting, the secretariat outlined its strategy for this review. It was agreed that the secretariat would provide the WATCH statement, attached as Annex A. At the February 2008 WATCH meeting, a number of approaches were suggested for how the issue of characterising the levels of risk involved in low level exposure to asbestos could be taken further forward by WATCH. One of the approaches considered by WATCH to take their proposals forward was to perform “Reality checks” of Hodgson and Darnton models for various population subgroups. It was suggested that further work could be carried out to investigate the apparent relationship between the data for environmental air asbestos levels (historically and currently) and the risk of mesothelioma in the general population. However, the COC secretariat could not find reference to this approach in their further meetings and therefore asked the HSE for comment on whether this approach was taken forward. Please refer to Annex B.

4. In 2010, Committee of the Health Council of the Netherlands put forward new values for chrysotile and amphibole asbestos, corresponding to the risk levels defined in the context of environmental and occupational health policy. The new values were calculated on the basis of a new meta-analysis commissioned by the Committee in the Netherlands. The Executive summary is attached in Annex C. The secretariat sought HSE’s view of the 2010 assessment of the Risks of environmental and occupational exposure to asbestos by the Health Council of the Netherlands and this is attached as Annex D.