

## Work-related cancers: Growing demand for urgent action

Written by Martin Banks on 26 September 2018 in Opinion  
Opinion

The workplace is making people sick and even killing them - and it's not just down to stress.



Firefighters are regularly exposed to carcinogens | *Photo credit: Press Association*

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The European Parliament, Commission and the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) have now joined forces to protect workers from exposure to what is arguably the leading cause of illness and death: carcinogens.

Included in the “at risk” groups are shift workers, firemen, miners, railway workers, truck drivers and others who work in these industries where workers are regularly exposed to carcinogens.

Key carcinogens, such as solar ultraviolet radiation, asbestos, diesel engine exhaust and silica, all contribute to the majority of occupational cancers. Some carcinogens are extensively used in a wide range of industries, from recycling to battery manufacture.

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A raft of wide-ranging EU measures have either been adopted already or are currently working their way through the legislative maze. The consensus is that urgent action is needed to stem the rising tide of deaths caused as a result of exposure to carcinogens at work. Typical work-related cancers, for example, lung cancer and mesothelioma, have a high mortality rate.

Little wonder, then, that the threat posed to workers by such dangerous substances has been described as a key challenge for occupational health and safety in the 21st century. Aside from the tragic human cost, work related illnesses and injuries are causing the EU about €476bn every year.

The overall aim, according to Marianne Thyssen, European Commissioner for employment, social affairs, skills and labour mobility, is to raise awareness and limit workers' exposure to cancer-causing chemicals.

Speaking at the launch of an awareness-raising campaign on dangerous substances (including carcinogens) in the workplace in April, the EU official declared, "This is a key priority for the Commission."

With the first carcinogens file already adopted and the second the subject of "trialogue" talks between the EU institutions, the current focus is firmly on the final legislative proposal. These relate to five new substances which are considered carcinogens: cadmium, beryllium, arsenic acid, formaldehyde and methylene.

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The additional five agents are on top of the 21 substances that have already been limited or proposed to be limited since the start of the Commission's mandate. The five new chemicals will be covered by the EU's carcinogens and mutagens directive, which sets a maximum concentration for the presence of a cancer-causing chemical in the workplace air.

French deputy Joelle Melin, a member of the committee on environment, public health and food safety, commends the executive for "striking the difficult balance" between protecting workers and the budgets of national social systems.

Her comments are echoed by fellow committee member and GUE/NGL group MEP Jiri Mastalka who, in his opinion, notes that cancer is the leading cause of work-related deaths in the EU.

Subject to certain amendments, the Czech deputy "strongly supports" the third file's proposals which, if enacted, would, he claims, prevent some 22,000 cases of work-related illness annually.

Belgian EPP group member Claude Rolin, who was Parliament's rapporteur on the second batch of measures (currently in trialogue), says that "having waited over 10 years" for a revision of the directive on carcinogens the need for "mandatory effective protection is urgent."

"With an estimated 120,000 people developing cancer as a result of exposure to carcinogens at work, the issue has become a cross-party priority"

With an estimated 120,000 people developing cancer as a result of exposure to carcinogens at work, the issue has become a cross-party priority and Socialist MEPs Ole Christensen, from Denmark, and his German party colleague Jutta Steinruck recently told this magazine about the importance of doing more to protect workers' health and safety.

In an op-ed, also signed by GUE/NGL group MEP Paloma Lopez Bermejo, they agree that the EU-OSHA, the Bilbao-based EU agency for safety and health at work, has a key role to play in "giving impulse to campaigns and awareness raising."

The agency says people working across a range of occupations, from working with flour in bakeries to construction sites, could be at risk of exposure to potentially fatal hazardous substances.

Amid growing demands for urgent action another issue highlighted is the perceived lack of data concerning terminally ill people in the workplace, including employees suffering from work-related cancer.

In September's Strasbourg session, MEPs adopted a report, 'Pathways for the reintegration of workers recovering from injury and illness into quality employment', compiled by the "Dying to Work" campaign.

Mesothelioma is a cancer most often associated with blue-collar professions, but the disease has touched all walks of life including the rich and the famous. The actor Steve McQueen is among those who have died from mesothelioma, a rare form of cancer often caused by exposure to asbestos which can take anywhere from 15 to 50 years after exposure before the symptoms become apparent.

MEPs are hoping that their current legislative efforts will tackle the risks that dangerous substances pose. MEPs are due to vote on the third carcinogens file in October.

## **About the author**

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