Sarah Wollaston (Totnes, Conservative) Click here to watch Sarah speak

It is a pleasure to follow Paul Goggins. He has put forward some compelling arguments.

I welcome the Bill. Mesothelioma is a terrible disease, and I have seen at first hand the indignity and pain that it has inflicted on many of my former patients. Perhaps it is because I have been there in the room while they have suffered repeatedly having fluid drained from their lungs that my main complaint about the Bill is that it does not go far enough in its scope. It would be a terrible shame if we were to pass it without taking the opportunity to act on this important area of prevention.

There is no safe lower exposure limit for asbestos, and children are particularly at risk. A child who is exposed to it at the age of five is between two and a half and five times more likely to develop mesothelioma than an adult aged 30. Since 1980, 228 teachers have died in this country as a result of negligent exposure to asbestos. Let us remember that every one of those teachers had 30 children in the classroom with them. Let us also remember that 75% of our schools contain asbestos, and evidence from the Health and Safety Executive shows that about 13,000 out of 23,800 schools were built at the time when asbestos use was at its peak. That asbestos is now crumbling. Every time a drawing pin is stuck into an asbestos board and taken out again, it releases about 6,000 asbestos fibres.

The trouble is that the argument we take in this country that we should literally cover up asbestos is not good enough. The evidence shows that slamming doors and children kicking kick-boards around the classroom edges can increase the level of asbestos fibres in the air by about 6,000 times. We should go far further than we are doing; that is what happened in the United States. In 1980, the US conducted its first major audit of asbestos and introduced stringent regulations in 1986. As a result, the level of mesothelioma in the US has stabilised since 1999; there are now about 14 deaths per million per year, whereas in 2009 in the UK there were 37.8 deaths per million and unfortunately, that level continues to rise. I know that the Minister has said he expects it to peak in 2015, but we do not yet know what the future impact of asbestos exposure in schools will be.

Michael Penning (Hemel Hempstead, Conservative)

This is a good opportunity for me to address a slight hiccup. The number of mesothelioma victims will peak in 2014—the claims will peak in 2015.

Sarah Wollaston (Totnes, Conservative)

I thank the Minister for clarifying the point. The trouble is that the Bill is about compensating people who have been negligently exposed in the course of their work. What will we be saying to future victims who are negligently exposed in the classroom? They will not have an employer; they are being negligently and knowingly exposed by the state, and it is simply not good enough that we take a view that there is nothing we can do.

Ian Lavery (Wansbeck, Labour)
Does the hon. Lady agree that there should be a phased, managed removal of all asbestos from schools, rather than relying on management plans, as prevention is always better than cure?

Sarah Wollaston (Totnes, Conservative)

I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman, and I think we should be starting with the schools with the highest risk. Since the original decisions were made, when air sampling tests for asbestos were technically difficult, could detail only a single pinpoint in time and were immensely expensive, the technology has moved on significantly. I call on the Minister to examine the new technology that is emerging in air sampling for asbestos, which gives real-time data on exposure and could be widely rolled out in schools’ prototypes are available. I ask the Minister to review during the passage of the Bill whether we could bring such new technology into the scope of the Bill.

I know that the property data survey was designed to be light touch, but it is extraordinary that not only the most expensive aspect of future building programmes in schools’ asbestos removal but the most dangerous aspect have been completely omitted. At the moment, parents have little knowledge of where their children are at risk. I wrote to all the schools in my constituency to ask about their asbestos policies, and one school replied that it had had an asbestos survey carried out a few years ago and that

"There is very little asbestos in the school, just in a few floor tiles and in the artex."

I am sorry, but asbestos in the floor tiles and in the artex is exactly the kind of thing I am most concerned about, because it is raining down on children in our classrooms. As I say, technology is now available that allows us to look in real time for any dangers, rather than spot-check after building work. What happens when 30 children charge round over floor tiles containing asbestos? I urge the Minister to take an opportunity during the passage of the Bill to examine that matter. Without acting to protect children from asbestos now, we will not see a long-term falling off in the incidence of mesothelioma and this terrible disease will affect those children in decades to come.

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