

National epidemiologic surveillance systems of asbestos-related disease and the exposed workers register

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KEY WORDS

Asbestos; mesothelioma; epidemiology

SUMMARY

Introduction: Italy was the main European producer of asbestos for most of the 20th century and raw asbestos imports were also significant until the 1990s; there was a mean delay of about ten years in the pattern of asbestos consumption in Italy compared with the USA, Australia, UK and Scandinavian countries. **Methods:** A national surveillance system (ReNaM) was implemented to identify cases of mesothelioma and investigate the modalities of asbestos exposure. A register of exposed workers and a database of companies presumably involved in the asbestos exposure problem was also developed. ReNaM has a regional structure and an operative centres (COR) have been established in 16 Italian regions. **Results:** The ReNaM database currently contains more than 5,000 mesothelioma cases and for 3,500 of these exposure modalities have been defined. Cases of pleural mesothelioma represent 93% of the total but there were also 334 cases of peritoneal mesothelioma, 15 of the pericardium and 14 of the tunica vaginalis of the testicle. Cases with ascertained exposure are thus distributed: 67.4% occupational exposure (ascertained, probable, possible), 4.3% domestic, 4.2% environmental and 1.3% hobby-related exposure, totalling 77.2%; 22.8% had unlikely or unknown exposure. The latency period is very long: on average 43.6 years. The register of asbestos-exposed workers contains figures on exposed workers notified to ISPESL up to 2004 and refers to the exposure period 1993-2003. The data registered cover 160 firms and about 700 workers. **Conclusions:** A national, coordinated and uniform epidemiological surveillance system of cases of mesothelioma and the definition of asbestos exposure through active research is extremely important in identifying unexpected contaminating sources. The register of asbestos-exposed workers allows risk to be monitored and protection measures to be implemented.