

Firms confused by new asbestos regulations

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New asbestos regulations, due to come into force next May, have left building managers confused over their responsibilities, risk experts warned this week.

The ensuing panic has prompted a rush to carry out asbestos survey work and specialist consultants now fear they will be unable to meet the sudden demand.

"We simply can't get enough experienced staff to cope with the rush," said Weeks Buro Veritas asbestos division technical director Peter Irvine. "Most of the minority of managers who are aware of the new regulations are convinced they have to get surveys done before the deadline."

The Control of Asbestos at Work Regulations (CAWR) 2002 introduced the concept of 'duty to manage' and requires whoever is deemed responsible for the building to prepare an asbestos management plan by 21 May next year.

But although each building must be thoroughly surveyed to produce a full plan, it is possible to submit an interim plan assuming that every part could contain asbestos. This halts any maintenance or alteration work being carried out but does buy building managers time.

Recent research by Zurich Risk Services and specialist consultant Cameron Durley highlighted that more than half the managers surveyed had no detailed knowledge of the new regulations. Up to two thirds still have no strategy for drawing up management plans.

"Basically most of the promotion has been left to specialist organisations like ourselves," said Cameron Dudley asbestos manager Dave Sibbitt.

"We have a credibility problem because obviously we are offering to carry out surveys and write asbestos management plans."

A spokeswoman for the Health & Safety Executive (HSE) said the new regulations were intended to halt the rise of asbestos related deaths among construction and maintenance workers -- around 750 deaths a year.

"It's very uncommon for a building dating from the 1970s or earlier not to be riddled with asbestos," she said.

"We estimate there are more than 500,000 buildings in the UK which still contain this dangerous material."

Last week the HSE posted a questionnaire on its website inviting dutyholders to report on how they were getting on with preparations for 21 May.