



## Preventing work-related cancer

Conference on carcinogens Lodewijk Asscher

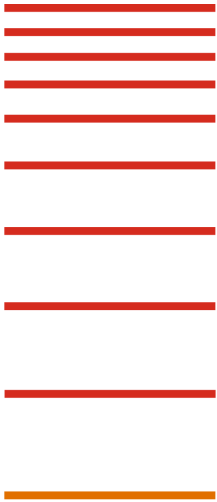
23 May 2016

Ladies and gentlemen,

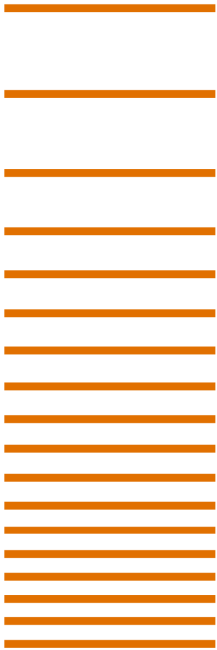
Work-related illness is something that is very hard to stomach. The mind-boggling statistics on work-related cancer perhaps even more so. Yet the two personal stories we've just heard are truly 'unstomachable'. That's not just because they reveal the misery behind the numbers. The suffering behind the facts.

These stories show us sheer helplessness. And they make us feel powerless to help too. Because no one has the power to turn back the hands of time. The power to go back and change history. To tell these nice people they aren't safe. To protect them from harm.

Sixty years ago there seemed to be no worry in sight, for Riky. Yet now we know there was all the reason to worry. To worry about what was not in sight. A single piece of asbestos floating in the air. Too tiny to witness with the bare eye, but big enough to destroy lives. Yet when she was diagnosed with cancer, it was too late to do anything. Carcinogens are ticking time-bombs that often detonate only decades later. A silent killer indeed.




While we may feel powerless, we cannot allow ourselves to be powerless. We owe that to the current generation of workers, and to the future ones. To young adolescents, like Riky at the time, who still have their lives ahead of them. Untroubled, yet unaware of the dangers around them. We need to do our utmost to protect them. To offer them a safe work environment. Too ensure their future is untroubled.




We need to eradicate the risk of cancer at work. The Dutch government has been pressing for better protection for workers from carcinogens for years. For example by expanding the list of carcinogens with limit values.

We've made this one of our top priorities during this EU Presidency too. I have been talking a lot with Marianne Thyssen about this and I am glad to see that our views are quite similar on health and safety at the workplace.

In this respect I am very pleased that the Commission, about 10 days ago, has proposed a set of 13 protecting limit values for a first group of carcinogenic substances. According to the information from the Commission's analysis this will prevent at least 2,000 deaths every year in the European Union. I want to thank Marianne Thyssen and her staff



for their determination and the enormous amount of work that they have done to prepare this important proposal. Yet in all honesty I have to say that there is still a long way to go before we reach a more substantial protection level. That's why we have to use this momentum and go on to extend the number of limit values to the 50 most frequently occurring carcinogens at workplaces in the Member States.



The good news is that — as I've understood it — the Commission is planning another set of additional limit values by the end of the year. Also, the Commission is preparing a request to the SCOEL [the Scientific Committee on Occupational Exposure Limits] to give advice on a next set of limit values for carcinogens. That is great news, because then we may reach the aim of a more substantial protection level in the European Union within a few years from now. Moreover, these steps will create a level playing field in Europe.

Every employee should be able to count on the same level of health and safety protection. We cannot afford competition on this.

To me, that is a race to the bottom in the worst kind of way imaginable. To save money, while putting at risk something that's truly priceless.



The health and lives of workers should not be put at risk.




Ladies and gentlemen,  
Together we have the power to change the game. Workers are only protected if employers stick to the rules. And workers and employers should both be aware of the risks at stake. For governments there is the responsibility to set the rules. And we need scientists to share their knowledge about this topic. We should all work together and try to make this happen.



I know that employers often have a lot on their mind. So much so, that they tend to focus just on what's important in the day-to-day business right now. And not on these hard-to-detect but life-threatening particles. The consequences of which will only become apparent many years later. But we cannot afford to turn a blind eye to the risks of working with carcinogens. That's why employers have a special responsibility. And I'm aware and happy that many take this very seriously.



This three-day conference addresses some practical issues. How big are the risks to exposure and health problems? Which sectors are prone to danger? Are there any positive or negative developments?

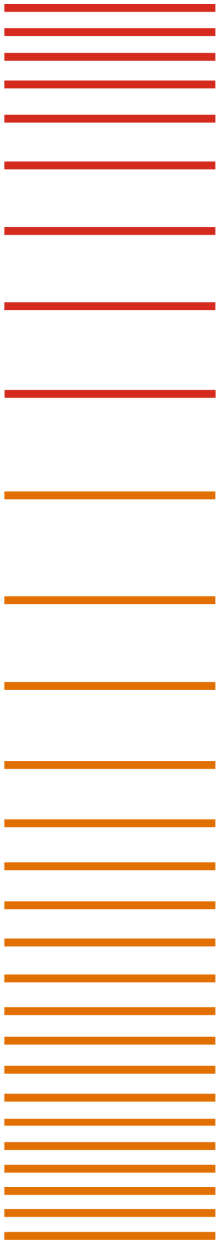


And more importantly, what can we do to eradicate these risks? What can companies do? What can governments do? And what can employees do themselves?

I hope you will learn a lot today and the coming days. Yet more importantly, I hope you will disseminate what you've learnt. Because the best practices are the ones that are known by everyone, employers and employees in particular.

That's my message to you. Spread the word. Share knowledge. It is very important that all employers and employees know about the risks of working with carcinogens and how to deal with them. Not only do we need to increase the coverage ratio of limit values, but also the coverage ratio of knowledge on how to implement the prevention measures. I am very glad that many of you are willing to help in this. And that we see positive results on this point.

Ladies and gentlemen,  
Everyone deserves a safe work environment. We need to do our utmost to provide such an environment. We cannot allow ourselves to believe there is no worry in sight. We need to worry about what is not in sight. While we do not have the power to turn back the hands of



time, we do have the power to shape the future.  
So that in 60 year's time, we don't have to say 'If  
only we could ...'.

Thank you.