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The following column from COCA appeared in the JOC

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Unregistered contractors can be dangerous

The recent conviction of a demolition contractor in B.C. shines the spotlight on a low profile killer of workers that has long been used as a building material.

The tragic exposure of workers to asbestos also contains within it some lessons that we must learn to avoid future harm.

Asbestos has been used for decades in B.C. and worldwide as an insulation and strengthening substance. But, asbestos fibres are deadly when they are loose in the air and breathed in by workers. The average house in B.C., built before 1990, can have asbestos in more than 3,000 locations.

Sanding, sawing, drilling or otherwise disturbing the asbestos bearing material will set the fibres loose into the air. Asbestos has been clearly linked to the diseases of asbestosis, lung cancer and mesothelioma.

We need to face some facts. The Lower Mainland is in the midst of a major makeover of its residential sector, as homes are being renovated or demolished to make way for upgraded or newer structures.

A few unscrupulous contractors are giving the entire construction industry a black eye.

When this minority group of fly-by-night contractors become involved – usually because their bids are low, buildings are being renovated, demolished or moved with no attention paid to the possible (and likely) presence of asbestos. In addition, there are deliberate and deceptive practices being used by some owners and contractors in order to avoid the time and expense that is needed for the safe removal and disposal of asbestos containing material.

As a result, workers and people in the community are being exposed to cancer causing asbestos fibres. WorkSafeBC has assembled an excellent team of officers to uncover and stop the reckless removal of asbestos, but they can't be everywhere.

There are systematic solutions to the pervasive problem of asbestos in the workplace – especially within residential renovation and demolition.

For example, municipalities themselves could make a hazardous materials survey a requirement before a building permit is issued. WorkSafeBC already requires this survey, but the building permit process is a municipal responsibility.

As well, the communication between municipalities and WorkSafeBC on this entire process could be improved. In some cases, the shady demolition contractor will demolish the house within hours of securing the municipal permit.

In other cases, the house is demolished before the permit is even obtained.

Municipalities have the authority to regulate the renovation, demolition and moving of residences. But, there doesn't appear to be a consistent two-way communication link between the municipalities and WorkSafeBC.

Two standard documents could be developed and used throughout B.C.: a hazardous materials survey and a post abatement clearance letter. These will take time, but some things can be done in the short term. First and foremost, the residential property owner should deal with reputable building, renovation and demolition contractors.

If the low bid from Fly-By-Night Contracting looks too good to be true – it probably is.

Safe work procedures for asbestos management, removal and disposal cost money and they take expertise. The phantom contractor can win the low bid because he doesn't have to spend money on safety and health compliance. He also he doesn't pay Employment Insurance or other taxes. In many cases, the phantom contractor is not registered with WorkSafeBC.

The best source for a reputable contractor is the local or regional construction association. The members of these associations tend to have been in business longer and, through the association, they learn and use safe work practices. They hold themselves to a higher standard. These precautions can help owners from leaving themselves open to expensive lawsuits and penalties from a wide variety of sources.

Grant McMillan is the president of the Council of Construction Associations (COCA), which represents the interests of 16 construction associations in B.C. on WorkSafeBC matters. Grant is also a member of the Journal of Commerce Editorial Advisory Board.

The JOC article is available online at:

http://www.joconl.com/article/id48498?search_term=asbestos