

Hundreds of schools riddled with asbestos

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MINISTERS have been accused of “complacency” over a hidden killer in schools and hospitals.

A report has revealed that hundreds of buildings are riddled with asbestos, potentially putting thousands of teachers, nurses and children at risk.

But the Department of Health and the Department for Education have told the Sunday Express that there are no plans to change policy to deal with the menace.

The report by the Respublica think tank – Don’t Breathe In: Bridging The Asbestos Safety Gap – shows it is still the biggest industrial killer in Britain.

The Health and Safety Executive reports that asbestos-related deaths top 5,000 a year.

It is estimated that 80 per cent of schools have asbestos, while 198 out of 211 NHS Trusts reported having it in hospitals.

It was widely used in insulation, flooring or roofing before 1999. When disturbed or damaged, particles are released that can cause serious diseases if inhaled.

Nurses and teachers are up to five times more likely to die of the asbestos-related cancer mesothelioma, while British children breathe in 10 times more particles than those in Germany. Respublica’s

report called for a new health and safety regime to manage asbestos in public buildings to the highest international standards, including a revision of the “duty to manage” and re-considering the risk of fatality.

It wants a central register of asbestos locations and a programme of removal introduced by the Government, starting with the most harmful varieties. However, despite Respublica’s findings, the Department of Health has no plans to change policy.

A spokesman said: “We are investing to target safety issues such as asbestos where it could pose a risk. This is part of a longterm approach to capital investment to modernise NHS estates.”

According to the department, individual NHS organisations are responsible for maintaining their estates and address issues such as asbestos. Additionally, it is considered safe if undisturbed and there are regulations in place so it is registered and safely contained.

It said when building or other work is carried out, experts are brought in to dispose of it safely.

Meanwhile, a DFE spokesman said: “We have provided £7.4billion for maintaining and improving buildings, and removing asbestos when it is the safest action.

“On top of that, we are rebuilding and refurbishing buildings in the worst condition, including removing asbestos.”

The department added that it follows advice from the Health and Safety Executive that if asbestos is unlikely to be damaged or disturbed, it is best left in place.

It claimed blanket or accelerated removal of asbestos could potentially be dangerous.

But the director of Respublica, report author Phillip Blond, branded the departments’ response “complacent”.

He said: “They have no way to assess ambient exposure and no response to rising deaths or acknowledgement of them.

“Their replies show they are out of date, and reliant on the HSE – which is very poor on asbestos.”

‘They have no response to the rising death toll’