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Testing for asbestos in kids' play sand no game



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Asbestos removal is carried out. Kim Baker Wilson / RNZ



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Researchers look into potential for airborne asbestos in sand

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Tucked above an unassuming safety store in Auckland, a small team is making big inroads into understanding the asbestos contamination of children's play sand.

Testing for any airborne particles from the products, it is thought to be the first research of its kind in the world.

"We're doing it really because it would be fabulous to be able to say 'no, the fibres aren't in the airspace'," AUT Associate Professor Terri-Ann Berry said.

"In saying that, it would give some real good reassurance to people who are concerned."



Terri-Ann Berry and Gregor Steinhorn. Kim Baker Wilson / RNZ

And people are still concerned months on from the first recalls. Mother of four-year-old twins, Elle Chrisp, is one of them.

"I'm just a mum who bought the product for her kids really," she told RNZ.

"I'm so grateful for the work they're doing and that they are wanting to get answers for us, because ultimately for me, I just want to know what the truth is."

That's what the researchers want to know too.



Asbestos testing is carried out. Kim Baker Wilson / RNZ

The testing site

It's meticulous work that is measured down to the millimetre.

Specially trained staff in PPE masks and suits are putting the sand known to be contaminated through its paces, with monitoring equipment hovering above.

The monitors are at the heights of children or the height of an adult - perhaps a teacher in a classroom.

"We can obviously not just have children in the kindergarten play with it and see what happens," Gregor Steinhorn from the Environmental Innovation Centre said.

"Given that asbestos is dangerous and there might be fibres which have to be released, everyone who's doing this experiment has to be protected."

That means a Class A asbestos enclosure, the kind that would be used for an asbestos clean-up.



Asbestos testing is carried out. Kim Baker Wilson / RNZ

There are air filters, an air locked decontamination shower and trained removalists are the only ones who go in.

"They are wearing a mask, they're wearing a protective suit and they are fully trained in how to work with asbestos," Steinhorn said.

"They usually have more boring jobs like cleaning buildings of asbestos, but yes, we had to do that because we don't know yet if asbestos fibres will be released and if so how many, so we have to assume the worst case that there is asbestos in the air, so anyone in that chamber has to be protected."

Inside the sealed chamber it is hot and drinks are on standby outside once decontamination is over.

When they are inside, they are essentially working to a script - acting out different ways of playing with the coloured sand.

More than a dozen different sands are being tested, and the conditions need to be the same for each test.

Hoping for a negative

Both Berry and Steinhorn know that seeing photos and videos of the tests, with workers suited and masked inside a sealed chamber, may be confronting for parents.

"It is quite an exciting study," Berry said. "But at the same time it's also quite a scary study in many ways, because what we really hope is that we get a negative response - and you never hope that in an experiment, you always want to get a positive answer, because that's part of the excitement."



An asbestos sample down a microscope, Kim Baker Wilson / RNZ

But not this time.

"If there are fibres in the air then that means that there's a possibility that they could be inhaled, and if they've been inhaled then there's also a possibility that they could cause cancer in the long-term," Berry, who's also a founder and director of the Environmental Innovation Centre, said.

"Look, not every fibre inhaled will cause cancer, it doesn't work like that."

But Berry said if they can show there are no asbestos fibres in the air, then it's something that can put people's minds at ease.

An anxious wait

Mother-of-two Elle Chrisp says it has been a challenge to find enough information in the months since the first recalls, which in turn had confusing messages.

"And I come to that with a legal background," she said.

Chrisp was also hoping the research would find no asbestos in the air from the play sand.

"This isn't about demonising a retailer... and that's what I really love about what their efforts are doing. It's not about seeking out a particular result," she said.

"It's whatever happens, we just want to know the truth."

She said her children played with the sand from when they were two.

"And we know that we may not know what the results are of them playing with that product for years and years and years... what the study is doing is determining if there's a risk, if there is a risk then we all pray and hope that that doesn't actually eventuate into anything."



Asbestos testing is carried out. Kim Baker Wilson / RNZ

The research was backed by WorkSafe and the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, and had attracted help from several funders and supporters - including Beacon Safety and FAMANZ, the Faculty of Asbestos Management Australia and New Zealand.

Beacon Safety regional manager Johan Marais said it was pleased it could offer space and equipment for what was important work.

Berry said researchers also turned to Givealittle, and she was lucky to have good connections to those who work with asbestos.

"I just felt very strongly as a scientist that this is an opportunity to get some answers," she said.

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