

Accident figures 'suspect'

Constructors blame fraud and lax medical scrutiny for high industrial injury rate, reports **Tad Stoner**

Construction site safety is far better than Government statistics indicate because workers frequently fake their injuries, the Hong Kong Construction Association claimed yesterday.

Fraud and lax medical scrutiny were among the reasons that led to abuse of safety-monitoring systems on construction sites, association officials said.

They said this meant accident statistics were largely inaccurate.

The association's president, Peter Lam, and its secretary-

general, Patrick Chan, said yesterday that site safety had improved tremendously since 1992.

They said an association survey showed 16,573 accidents last year, a 12 per cent drop on 1992.

Hong Kong has approximately 50,000 construction workers, meaning about one in every three labourers can expect to be injured on the job, according to the Government.

Lam disputed the accuracy of the Government statistics, blaming workers, the accident reporting system and medical personnel.

"The accident rate [as reported in Government statistics] has actually gone up since we have had safety officers on the sites," Lam said.

"We believe the system is being abused.

"People fake their injuries to get the compensation, then work on other jobs.

"They go to the hospital, but the only criteria for how long people stay out of work are subjective.

"There is no definition of what is a major or minor injury."

Chan said a "reportable" accident in Hong Kong is one

that forces a worker to be off work for four days or more, but loopholes abounded and doctors routinely handed out four-day medical leave certificates even for small complaints.

"There is no inspection of seriousness in [the compilation] of statistics," he said.

"A cut finger, if someone is sent off for four days, is [statistically] the same as a broken leg or broken arm.

"We believe that many injuries could be treated on site with first aid, but if the cases go to a hospital or clinic, most of the time they are given four days."

Chan said a 1992 construction association survey suggested an accident rate almost half that of official numbers.

"The Government said there were 302 accidents per 1,000 workers, while our survey found 162 per thousand," he said.

"The 302 figure is not wrong, but there are a group of contractors who are doing better than the industry average.

"We surveyed a different group of contractors.

"Those who replied to us are the better contractors."

Chen Kam-hong, the chief executive of the Association for the Rights of Industrial Accident Victims, disagreed.

"The construction association is trying to sidetrack the problem," Chen said.

"They are putting the blame on someone else, trying to say that some workers' injuries are not so serious.

"They don't want to say the real reasons [for accidents]."

Chen believed the problem was worse than the Government statistics indicated.

He said two in every five construction workers were injured on the job.

"The problem is not with [lenient] doctors, but that contractors are not aware of safety and are doing nothing for workers," he said.

"Every time we ask for a new ordinance or improvement to the old one, they say it will cost money."

A Labour Department official rejected the association's accident survey, saying that if "the survey was not comprehensive, then, yes, the results may vary".

He said on-site doctors were usually Government employees, and were unlikely to hand out four-day medical leave readily.

"We think a lot more needs to be done about safety, though, and mostly on the part of employers," the official said.

"The rationale for that is that those who create the risks should take some of the responsibility."

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