

\$25m for ailing workers

The Government has set aside about \$25 million as compensation for about 700 workers, diagnosed as silicotic cases.

Silicosis is a lung disease induced by inhaling flinty particles.

The move paves the way for the Government to introduce the Pneumoconiosis Compensation Scheme, which gives insurance coverage to workers who contract dust diseases of the lung during their employment.

The most common of these diseases in Hongkong are silicosis and abestosis.

Speaking on the Workmen's Compensation (Amendment) (No 2) Bill 1978, which will give effect to the scheme after the Legislative Council has approved it, the Commissioner for Labour, Mr J. N. Henderson, outlined the three stages in which the scheme will be introduced.

The first stage covers those workers who are already known to have contracted pneumoconiosis and who may or may not still be employed in specified industries.

It also covers those workers who have left the industry before pneumoconiosis is included as an occupational disease and who are diagnosed within a period of 10 years from this date.

All these workers will be compensated on an ex-gratia non-statutory basis by the Government on the basis of an updated assessment of the disability sustained.

The second stage of the scheme, which will be implemented at the same time as the first, will cover workers employed in specified industries who are diagnosed

as suffering from pneumoconiosis in the initial X-ray examination which all workers will be required to undergo.

Mr. Henderson said these workers will initially be paid compensation by the Government.

But such payments, together with interest, will subsequently be recovered through a levy to be imposed on employers of specified industries.

He said it would take at least eight months to complete the initial X-ray examinations which all workers in specified industries must take.

The final stage of the scheme will go into operation on completion of the second stage.

This will mean that all workers who have been given a clean bill of health in the initial X-ray examination and who are employed in specified industries on or after the date of the Bill coming into force, or who after leaving the industry are diagnosed as pneumoconiotic within a period of 10 years, will be covered.

Any compensation due to such workers will be paid from the statutory compensation fund.

Mr Henderson said the fund will be financed by premia from employers in the specified industries, who would also be required to meet the cost of the initial and periodical medical examinations of the workers.

He said the levy involved in the second stage, the X-ray examination and the insurance premium, would be roughly \$140 per person per annum in the first year, based on an estimate of 30,000 workers needing insurance coverage.

He pointed out that since the levy will cease after the completion of the second stage, what will initially be about a one per cent addition to the labour cost will tend to decline relatively in time.