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# 40,000 workers risk going deaf

By AGNES CHEN

More than 40,000 workers in factories and construction sites are exposed to excessive noise measuring at or above 90 decibels — the maximum acceptable standard — for a continuous eight hours or more.

This was revealed by the chief factory inspector of the Labour Department, Mr Chan Shiu-lap, who was referring to the findings of a yet to be completed report on *Hearing Conservation Programme*, conducted by the department in October 1978.

The figure represented one in 25 of the one million factory and construction site workforce.

Mr Chan said the department selected 400 noisy factories at random to arrive at the figure.

The figure is believed to be more or less the same today, Mr Chan said.

The report was not completed because an expert on noise pollution from the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation, Mr Bryan Miles, was invited by the department to study the problem in March last year.

Mr Miles compiled a "confidential" report and submitted recommendations to the department in March this year.

And it is still being studied by the Commissioner for Labour.

After his three-month stay, Mr Miles came up with a figure of 175,000 workers from 44,000 factories and 17,000 construction sites running the risk of becoming deaf.

But when this figure was put to Mr Chan, he said he did not know how Mr Miles arrived at it.

Mr Chan said the figure of 17,000 construction sites was far too great.

"It should be about 1,400," he said.

Mr Chan said the department is mainly concerned with alerting the workers that excessive noise can be a health hazard and hope they will wear ear protectors.

"Most of the workers are unaware of the noise danger and it is our aim to educate them," Mr Chan said.

"Whatever legislative control is enacted the expected effect cannot be achieved without the workers' co-operation," he added.

According to Mr Chan, legislation against noise as a health hazard is likely to be introduced next year.

It will ensure that for every increase of three dBA after the maximum 90 dBA, the factory owners will halve the working time — as stated in Britain's Code of Practice for Reducing the Exposure of Employed Persons to Noise.

"This means that if the noise level is monitored at 93dBA, the workers will only work for four continuous hours and for 96dBA, two consecutive hours," Mr Chan explained.

"Legislation will be used as a weapon against inconsiderate factory owners and stubborn workers but the most effective means to solve the problem is to arouse the safety consciousness of both factory owners and workers," he said.

Mr Chan commented that the problem of noise as a health hazard, according to the report, is "not very acute.

"This is because there is no heavy industry in Hongkong," he explained.

He added that factories here, even big ones, are small compared to those in other countries.

"And noise generated under one roof is not that great," he went on.

Mr Chan said that for most of the factories, the average noise level is monitored at 75 dBA to 85 dBA.

And for the noisiest industry — construction sites, metal manufacturing and weaving — the average noise level is 95 dBA to 100 dBA.

Referring to the British Medical Journal published on November 15 which stated that an equivalent of 80 dBA for an eight-hour day would largely remove the hazard, Mr Chan agreed, but added that such a reduction would not be very practicable here.

"One of the problems is that you have to consider how many machines you have to scrap," he said.

He also remarked that sometimes, when walking on the road, people are already exposed to noise which may well be over 80 dBA.

"The Medical Journal is the Medical Journal, but we go by the Code of Practice which accepts 90 dBA as the legal standard," he said.

"The United States even aims at 75 dBA but discussions with my US counterparts revealed that it is impossible, at least for the coming few years," he added.

Regarding the use of "musical ear muffs" as suggested by Mr Miles, Mr Chan said he is not in favour of them because they are likely to distract people from work and result in accidents.