

The Problem with a Legacy

Asbestos Safety in New Zealand Workplaces



Published by Safety 'n Action | August 2026 *Featuring insights from Alannah Elliott, NZ Asbestos and Safety Expert.*

Alannah Elliott came to asbestos by accident, walking into an office asking for a job in 2012, holding ladders while a surveyor worked. Fourteen years later she is New Zealand's leading asbestos trainers, having spent her career working across surveying, laboratory analysis, clearance inspections, training and industry safety development.

Her expertise goes well beyond the training room. Alannah helped review New Zealand's new suite of asbestos Good Practice Guidelines and contributed extensively to the *Asbestos Assessment Good Practice Guideline with photographs to demonstrate good practice*. She is a Licensed Asbestos Assessor, a Full Member of FAMANZ, HASANZ registered, Commit2Fit competent, and holds the Level 4 NZ Certificate in Adult and Tertiary Teaching. She also contributes to national core competency standards through the Education, Health and Community Industry Skills Board and leads the education day for the annual FAMANZ Asbestos Conferences.

Her view of the asbestos problem is plain: "It's quite a big problem. It's every building built at that time, every water pipe installed at that time [20th Century]. It's all of our infrastructure, because it was just the product of the day."

That product is still very much here.

What Asbestos Does to People

New Zealand banned raw asbestos use in 1999 and importation in 2016. But a ban on new use does nothing about the legacy already embedded in the built environment. Any building constructed before 2000 may contain asbestos

containing materials (ACM) in roofing, wall linings, floor coverings, pipe lagging and ceiling tiles.

Intact, undisturbed ACM does not typically release fibres. The danger comes when it is disturbed during renovation, demolition or maintenance. The diseases it causes, asbestosis, mesothelioma and lung cancer, take an average of 40 years to develop. Combined with smoking, asbestos exposure increases lung cancer risk fifty times.

That time delay is why asbestos is systematically underestimated. As Alannah puts it: *"We're very reactive around electricity and heights because the harm is instant. Asbestos is a delayed, cumulative hazard, and it's really hard to make that connection."*

Where Organisations Get It Wrong

The management plan in the drawer. Asbestos registers are commissioned, filed, and forgotten. Workers arrive on site with no idea what's in the walls. *"Good asbestos management is communication. How many people who turn up to do the job are given that information that's been filed away before they even get there? Most of the time, that doesn't happen. It's a big gap."*

Cognitive dissonance. In one training session, a participant mentioned his colleague Tim, who had died of asbestos related cancer, then dismissed his own exposure as insignificant. *"No matter what evidence is presented, it doesn't reconcile. We have so much of that problem with asbestos."*

Money and time winning over safety. Even organisations that care find asbestos management sliding when budgets tighten. *"As soon as money and time slide in, even something you have to have slides onto the nice to have list."*

Training that people actually want to attend. Effective asbestos training needs more than good information. It needs enough time for people to ask questions, challenge assumptions and connect what they are learning to the situations they encounter at work. Alannah deliberately delivers her courses practicing at Safety n Action across 4-8 hours rather than rushing learners through the material. That space matters, particularly with a hazard that can feel distant or abstract because the consequences of exposure may not appear for decades.

As Alannah explains, *"For adults to learn something new, you need to give them time to sit with the information and process it."*

The goal is not simply to get people through a course. It is to give them the time to understand why working safely with and around asbestos matters and leave better equipped to recognise and respond to the risk.

What Good Practice Looks Like

Good asbestos management is an ongoing practice, not a document in a folder.

- Know what you have – commission a survey if your building predates 2000 and you don't have a current asbestos register
- Communicate it – every contractor on site should see the relevant information before work begins, not after
- Survey before renovations or demolition – an asbestos management plan is not sufficient before specific work starts; commission a targeted, intrusive survey every time the fabric of the building is going to be disturbed.
- Use licensed removalists – [Asbestos Removal Class A](#), [Asbestos Removal Class B](#) and verify the licence on WorkSafe's public register
- Match training to the role – [awareness training](#) for those who may encounter ACM; deeper competency-based training for those who remove it and PCBU obligations training for those who manage it.

One of the most common gaps Alannah identifies is organisations providing the same generic awareness training to everyone, regardless of actual exposure or responsibility. A receptionist in a pre-2000 building and a maintenance worker drilling into walls have very different training needs.

The Training Gap

The asbestos removal workforce is predominantly practical, trades backgrounds, people who learn by doing. Written, theory heavy assessments do not accurately test whether workers can safely manage asbestos in the real world.

"Assessing someone via writing is just the easy way. It's not necessarily the best way for learners whose least favourite way of learning is sitting and writing. They want to learn by doing."

Good asbestos training is built around practical, problem-solving activities and demonstration, combined with written assessments directly related to real life scenarios, not just recall. It meets learners where they are and assesses what matters: can this person do the job safely?

Learn more:

Alannah was recently published in the FAMANZ newsletter [<https://mailchi.mp/famanz/famanz-june202618>], talking on the issues currently facing the industry standards around asbestos training. This was followed up with

her presenting a webinar hosted by FAMANZ, calling the industry in both Australia and New Zealand to action. This webinar is available to view on the Members area of the FAMANZ website [<https://www.famanz.org/>].

It is clear that sharing asbestos knowledge and lifting industry standards is a true passion for Alannah. You can follow her on LinkedIn as she works hard towards a future of no more asbestos related disease [<https://www.linkedin.com/in/alannah-elliott/>].

