

Workplace link likely to neurological diseases

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CAR spray-painters, electricians, and farm workers could all be at greater risk of neurological illnesses such as dementia, Parkinson's and motor neurone disease, a leading Kiwi professor says.

There is strong evidence to suggest exposure to solvents, pesticides, wood preservatives and metals such as lead and copper could cause the diseases, Neil Pearce told health professionals at a conference at Te Papa yesterday.

Professor Pearce, who founded Massey University's Centre for Public Health Research and is now based in London, said occupational neurological disease was a big public health problem, but little research had been done to try to confirm suspicions.

"Current evidence indicates that familial factors play only a minor role, and environmental exposures are of more importance."

Workplace causes of neurological diseases had not been studied in depth, but Parkinson's studies had already shown links to various occupational exposures, he said.

It was thought that agricultural chemicals, welding, electromagnetic fields, metals and solvents caused neurological disease, and it was time to put that to research.

Prof Pearce believed that exposure to solvents and pesticides meant car spray-painters, pharmaceutical workers and manufacturers

of textiles, plastics, polymers and fibreglass were at risk.

"Neurological disease is incredibly important. It's becoming more and more important as the population gets older.

"We know there are some occupational causes and we are likely to find more if we do the research."

Massey University's Centre for Public Health Research director, Jeroen Douwes, said occupational diseases would be 100 per cent preventable if it was known what caused them, so he was overseeing three studies of workplace neurological outcomes.

"No work has previously been done in New Zealand, so we're really the forefront internationally, looking at these things."

One study was to find whether car spray-painters exposed to solvents showed any symptoms associated with neurological disease, such as memory loss, slowness and personality changes.

There were 100 participants already tested, but the centre needed another 300 car spray-painters to complete the study, he said.

The other studies would assess the health effects of dock workers' exposure to fumigants as they opened shipping containers, and the risk factors for developing motor neurone disease.

The centre hoped to determine where the biggest exposure problems lay and in turn help industry find ways to eliminate risk.