

Termites and words



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Words matter. Take an inspection report. If you use the wrong words or are sloppy in your choice of words, it can quickly become a lawyer's

picnic. That's why your quality insurer pays attention to the wording you use. Even worse, there are words our clients want to hear that we can almost never use, such as "there are no termites in the house". Managing client expectations is a big part of AEPMA's codes of practice; use them for your advantage.

In the latest draft of AS 3660.1, which hopefully will be open for public comment at standards.org.au by the time this is published, there have been many forced changes of wording. Such fashions have always been with us. In the 1990s, we had to take out the word protect as this was seen as absolute and unobtainable. So now we manage instead. In the latest version, in line with AEPMA and Australian Building Codes Board



Feral pigs have damaged a mesh sock above ground.

(ABCB) policy, we've lost nearly every use of the word barrier. Now when you spray the soil, install a single collar or roll out that plastic sheet, you are installing a management system and your efforts are not to create a barrier to entry but to deter concealed access. The word barrier was seen as absolute with the fear that people would assume that any such installation would provide the expectation that termites would be totally and permanently excluded from the structure. Fair enough I suppose, but the word barrier does survive in the draft where it is used to describe moisture barriers as required in the Building Code of Australia (BCA) and nobody really expects these to prevent all possible moisture entry. It is a battle lost. AS 3660.1 exists primarily to meet the needs of the Building Code of Australia (BCA) and so has to be written in a manner acceptable to the ABCB so that it can become a referenced document of the BCA. The current expectation of the ABCB is that AS 3660.1 will act as a recipe book of solutions for builders. This should continue to work well for soil chemicals but not so well for the more complex systems. Proprietary details of Termi-Mesh and Granitgard aren't covered in the Standard any more, and so too the details of the reticulation systems and the jointing of the proprietary sheets has had to be left out. Only generic details remain. Manufacturers can avoid the problems this creates by relying instead on their Codemark certifications. Most do, as a building inspector has no choice but to accept a Codemarked installation.

Another problem with words arose when manufacturers of termiticide impregnated sheets began to describe these as physical barriers. They might well be, but only in the sense that treated soil is also a physical barrier. For the Standards, only those products that don't rely on a termiticide can be called physical. So now we will be talking about physical termite management systems and chemical termite management systems and

their components. Don't expect this to happen overnight. I still see specifications for termite spraying as Part A (for under floor) and Part B (for perimeter) even though these terms were withdrawn in the early 1990s.

The days of the term barrier were numbered as soon as Bayer introduced Premise, the first non-repellent termiticide, and things suddenly became a whole lot more complicated. Premise stopped termites attacking houses but didn't stop termites entering what then became known as the treated zone. It wasn't strictly a barrier like all that came before. Times change, words change and we adapt and move on.

One thing that doesn't change though are attacks on competing products. Some have taken my comment in the last issue to the effect that the ultra-narrow *Heterotermes vagus* penetrated the first field trials of Termi-Mesh meant that there is a problem with the product. Not a problem, they just wove the production material at a slightly closer spacing. We also hear claims of corrosion problems but if you have enough salt around to corrode even marine grade stainless steel it isn't really likely that you'll have any termites left to bother things. On Oahu, the populous Hawaiian island, Termi-Mesh is specified as a sock for all the timber power poles. These socks last well on poles placed right on the seashore and regularly subject to salt spray. This year, I did find poles where rutting feral pigs had damaged the mesh sock above ground but again, no termite attack through the mud holes. I know that the space-filling Granitgard system is inherently less prone to induced failure, but that's no reason to bag other approaches. Termi-Mesh is a very successful Australian anti-termite system.

As well as helping out with AEPMA Codes of Practice, teaching at NMIT and Chairing the Standards Australia committee that's re-writing the 3660 termite series, Dr Don is a biologist with a long history of studying termites – you can find him at drdons.net