

Monday 19 July 2021

Unions call on Minister Hunt to urgently act on silicosis

Unions have met with Health Minister Greg Hunt to urgently address the absence of preventative measures in the National Dust Disease Taskforce's (NDDT) report - released last week.

The National Dust Diseases Taskforce was established over two years ago to inquire into the causes of occupational dust diseases and make recommendations to provide the necessary protections. For the last two and a half years the NDDT has narrowed its focus to just silicosis in the engineered stone industry despite significant outbreaks in quarrying, construction and other industries.

Unions support the NDDT recommendations on data gathering, coordination of information and awareness raising, medical diagnosis and research – however the balance of the recommendations favour these activities at the expense of improved prevention which is the only way to effectively reduce the number of workers suffering from a highly preventable group of diseases.

Australian unions find that the current NDDT report:

1. Fails to recommend regulatory or compliance activities for potential exposures across all industries, including general construction, tunnelling, and quarries,
2. Defers consideration of a ban on importation of some or all engineered stone products until 2024 without any quantitative measures on what are the “measurable and acceptable improvements in compliance rates by the engineered stone sector”,
3. Recommends a self-regulatory model for industries where there is a risk of exposure to respirable crystalline silica – a model that has clearly failed,
4. Fails to address the critical shortfall of workers' compensation schemes for workers diagnosed with silicosis and other dust diseases,
5. Defers a licensing scheme for work with engineered stone until after the conduct of a Regulatory Impact Analysis,
6. Contains no firm timelines other than for the establishment of a cross jurisdictional governance mechanism to improve communication and information sharing or a targeted education and communication campaign.

Australian unions call on Minister Hunt to adopt the following recommendations:

1. Immediately adopt a licensing system for work with engineered stone as a transitional measure toward the implementation of a ban,
2. Immediately draft a regulation that requires persons conducting a business or undertaking (PCBUs/Employers) to identify risks of exposure to respirable crystalline silica and other inorganic dusts and apply strong measures that control hazards at its source,
3. Classify silicosis and other silica related diseases as deemed diseases for the purpose of workers compensation,
4. Establish compensation funds to support those suffering from dust diseases such as silicosis and coal workers pneumoconiosis, and their families. These funds should be funded by particular industries,
5. Invest in product development that could replace engineered stone with a much safer product,
6. Immediately further reduction in the Workplace Exposure Standard for respirable crystalline silica.

Quotes attributable to ACTU Assistant Secretary Liam O'Brien:

“Exposure to high quantities of silica causes silicosis, lung damage and autoimmune diseases like scleroderma. These are entirely preventable if the Federal Government introduces legislation to control hazards, properly funds workplace education and invests in alternative products.

“1 in 5 engineered stone workers is expected to develop silicosis, which is incurable and can even leave workers needing a lung transplant. The Government must move to immediately ban these dangerous products before more workers are diagnosed with this incurable disease.

“Workers with silicosis can expect a lifetime living with the incurable disease, but compensation runs out 2 years after diagnosis. This must be fixed so that workers are supported for as long as necessary. These workers need long-term health, financial and vocational support and retraining assistance that will enable sufferers to return to safe and meaningful work.

“The NDDT report is welcome in its pursuit for further information and awareness training, and medical diagnosis and research – however this does little for prevention. We need government action now to protect workers when working with high levels of silica.”

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