

Tuesday 12 October 2021

We must not leave workers behind on dust disease prevention

Safe Work Australia will meet on Thursday to decide whether to expand regulations protecting workers from dust diseases like silicosis beyond those working directly with engineered stone which is used in the manufacture of bench tops. It is essential that Safe Work Australia ensures that all workers are protected from deadly dust diseases.

Workers in general construction, quarrying, mining, and tunnelling are exposed to damaging levels of silica and dust from which they are developing preventable dust diseases, yet there are currently no specific regulations to protect them.

Exposure to high quantities of silica causes lung cancer, silicosis, and autoimmune diseases like scleroderma. These diseases are preventable with adequate regulations.

Australian Unions have recommended that silica be regulated in a similar manner to lead; requiring health monitoring, information and training and informing job applicants of the risks associated with exposure and the risk control measures in place.

In parallel with these regulations, unions are also calling for a ban on the use of engineered stone with high silica content to be staged over three years.

Quotes attributable to ACTU Assistant Secretary Liam O'Brien:

“Health and safety regulations on deadly dust exposure need to cover workers facing significant risk of exposure in quarrying, mining, and tunnelling who currently have limited protections.

“Workers across a range of industries are being diagnosed with lung cancer, silicosis and autoimmune diseases like scleroderma that are all preventable with enforceable and clear regulations.

“It is a national shame that workers in Australia are again being diagnosed with silicosis. We must stop a new wave of workplace illness and death similar in scale to that caused by asbestos, but only if we act now to protect the workers who are at greatest risk.

“No worker must be left behind as we try to end preventable dust diseases.”

Media contact: Isabella Tilley 0414 894 040

Quotes attributable to AWU National Secretary Daniel Walton:

“We're appalled that new model regulations may only help a small slice of the Australian workers at high risk of developing silicosis at work.

I know stonecutting has been a big focus, but it's vital we look well beyond that if we want to save lives. What about the miners and quarry workers who process the silica directly?

What about the civil construction workers who drill tunnels and are exposed to silica dust with barely any ventilation?

Our union is regularly finding tunnels full of airborne silica dust. We typically manage to shut them down for a time while the company ventilates and cleans up, but we know this kind of whack-a-mole approach is no real solution.

As things stand, thousands of Australians will die from silicosis as a result of their work. Most of these could be saved if we introduce tough, wide-reaching new regulations about silica dust exposure. What we believe is coming from Safe Work Australia won't cut it.

It is unconscionable that Safe Work Australia could examine this problem for years and then come up with a set of new regulations that do nothing for thousands of Australians exposed to silica dust.”

Media contact: Anil Lambert 0416 426 722