

Tuesday 28 February

Big step forward in campaign for protections from silicosis

Workers suffering from deadly silicosis today welcomed a major step forward in their campaign to commence consultation and analysis in the introduction of a ban on the use of engineered stone products. They also welcomed the decision to introduce stronger laws to protect workers exposed to silica in industries such as mining, quarrying, tunnelling, building, construction, and manufacturing.

Workplace Health and Safety Ministers met today and announced a strong response to combat this deadly disease, including commencing consultation and analysis on the introduction of a ban on engineered stone and stronger rules for workplaces where workers are exposed to respirable crystalline silica.

Modelling by Curtin University estimates that up to 103,000 Australian workers across a range of sectors, including tunnelling, quarrying, cement work, mining, and construction, will be diagnosed with silicosis as a result of exposure to silica dust at work and more than 10,000 will develop lung cancer.

The consultation will include both prohibition of the use of engineered stone products along with the introduction of an import restriction that would prevent these deadly products from entering Australia.

The rules for all high-risk silica workplaces that the government has announced would also include strong measures requiring all employers in those high-risk industries to undertake regular air monitoring and report breaches to work health and safety regulators. It will also include a requirement for workers to undertake silica awareness training.

This is a huge win for workers, but the fight is not over as the specific legislative and regulatory reforms must now be finalised, along with arrangements for better compensation. Unions welcome the acknowledgment that preventing exposure is a priority with silicosis to be a standing item for future WHS Minister's meetings.

Over the past two decades there has been a high uptake in the use of high-silica content engineered stone products and this, combined with increased exposures in other industries, has resulted in a dramatic increase in the numbers of people diagnosed with silicosis and lung cancer.

Australia has a tragic history of dust-borne disease, with a complete ban on asbestos delayed for 70 years after the risks were known, killing tens of thousands of workers. Despite banning asbestos in all its forms 20 years ago, more than 4000 Australians die every year of asbestos-related disease.

Unions will continue to work with governments to ensure the legislative and regulatory framework to implement today's decision is effective in protecting workers.

Quotes attributable to ACTU Assistant Secretary Liam O'Brien:

"Every worker has the right to safe and health work. No one should be exposed to materials that can kill them.

"Today is a huge step towards protecting hundreds of thousands of workers in these industries from deadly silicosis and it furthers our determination to ensure the changes announced today are implemented quickly and regulated properly.

"No one can forget the tragic stories of workers in recent weeks and months – often young people who are now struggling to breathe and unable to work. Unions will not forget, and we will carry today's momentum into discussions with government about implementing this change.

"Bernie Banton would be proud of all workers suffering with silicosis who have campaigned through their unions for change. Today is their day."

Media contact: Tim 0409 059 617