

Friday, 27 October 2023

## Safe Work Australia's recommendation will save lives says ACTU

The ACTU welcomes the report released by Safe Work Australia recommending a complete prohibition on the use of engineered stone in Australia.

The report followed broad consultation with business groups, engineered stone manufacturers and fabricators, unions and health experts. It also included detailed economic evaluation and an analysis of evidence from the best available science when developing its recommendation.

Safe Work Australia endorsed the medical and scientific evidence that lung diseases caused by engineered stone dust take less time to develop, are more severe and become worse quickly.

There were three options considered by Safe Work Australia:

Option 1: Prohibition on the use of all engineered stone

Option 2: Prohibition on the use of engineered stone containing 40% or more crystalline silica

Option 3: As for option 2, with an accompanying licensing scheme for PCBUs working with engineered stone containing less than 40% crystalline silica.

Given that scientific evidence found that even engineered stone with lower silica content posed unmanageable risks to the health and safety of workers, Safe Work Australia recommended a blanket ban of the product.

The report noted that engineered stone dust is very fine – nano scale – meaning it penetrates deep into the lungs of workers, with the dust containing resins, metals, pigments, and other forms of silica dust. Thus, even when workers cut and fabricate low-silica stone products, the very fine dust particles of silica that enter the lungs of workers cause diseases including silicosis.

Current laws have not protected workers – 1 in 4 engineered stone workers have contracted silicosis under the current framework. The report made clear that the costs to the community from the continued use of engineered stone far outweighed any benefits, and that the only way to protect future workers was to prohibit the use of engineered stone entirely.

The ACTU Executive this week joined the CFMEU in outlining the union movement's intention to ban this deadly product, commonly used for kitchen and bathroom benchtops, if state governments had not acted by July next year.

### Quotes attributable to ACTU Assistant Secretary Liam O'Brien:

"This recommendation by Safe Work Australia will save lives. We urge all governments to introduce it at the earliest opportunity.

Silicosis and silica-related diseases pose an unacceptable health risk to workers. This report shows that there is no type of engineered stone that is safe for workers.

No worker in Australia should have to plan their funeral and farewell their loved ones, all because of a lung disease they got from working with this deadly stone.

The report made clear that there is no other option than an outright ban on engineered stone. Keeping this deadly product legal means more workers getting health problems and more workers dying.

We welcome the decision earlier this year of WHS Ministers to introduce stronger silica rules covering all work. However, this report makes clear that to truly protect the health and wellbeing of workers, we must ban this deadly fashion product once and for all.

## **ENDS**

**Note to editors:** a joint statement by is also attached:

Australian Institute of Health & Safety

Australian Institute of Occupational Hygienist

Cancer Council

Lung Foundation

Public Health Association of Australia

The Australian and New Zealand Society of Occupational Medicine Inc

Australian Council of Trade Unions

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