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Australian workers exposed to unsafe chemicals

Outdated chemical exposure limits in Australian workplaces are exposing workers to cancer-causing chemicals, despite government experts warning more than five years ago that current limits are unsafe.

Australian Unions are calling on Federal, State and Territory Work Health and Safety Ministers to lower exposure limits for nine hazardous chemicals at the end of the month when they are due to respond to new limits recommended by Safe Work Australia.

The ACTU and five public health organisations, including the Cancer Council of Australia have written to Work Health and Safety Ministers to adopt more proactive usage levels. (See joint letter: attached).

The chemicals include the known carcinogens benzene, formaldehyde, and respirable crystalline silica, as well as chlorine, copper, hydrogen cyanide, hydrogen sulphide, nitrogen dioxide, and titanium dioxide.

Workers in demolition, housing construction and tunnelling are among those most frequently exposed to the nine chemicals.

Nurses and medical technicians who collect and preserve tissue samples are also impacted, along with workers who monitor drinking water, manufacture wood products and pharmaceuticals, and work with chemical solutions in laboratories.

Under the current chemical exposure limits, these workers face risks of cancer, lung disease, burns, poisoning, nerve damage, and reproductive harm.

Safe Work Australia first recommended lowering chemical exposure limits in 2022 after independently reviewing more than 600 workplace chemicals.

Work Health and Safety Ministers agreed to the new limits for all but nine of the chemicals; but left out this final group of nine after lobbying by employer and industry groups.

Safe Work Australia has since completed a further assessment and confirmed for a second time that the existing exposure limits for the remaining nine chemicals are failing to protect workers' health.

Safe Work Australia's latest recommendations would bring Australia into line with international standards. The proposed exposure limit for benzene would align with regulations in Europe; formaldehyde with those in Europe and New Zealand; and hydrogen cyanide with regulations covering most of Europe and Singapore. Limits around exposure to hydrogen sulphide would match those in Japan and several European countries. Silica standards would mirror those already in force in New Zealand and parts of Canada.

Australian Unions are calling on Federal, State and Territory Work Health and Safety Ministers to impose stricter exposure limits on the nine chemicals by adopting Safe Work Australia's new lower recommended limits.

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

"Sadly, more cancer cases and serious illnesses have emerged during the five years that workers have waited for tougher regulatory action to limit exposure to these nine chemicals.

"Despite our efforts to address silica dust in workplaces, workers continue to be exposed to this deadly substance at twice the safe limit.

"Our national health and safety experts have determined that current exposure limits are not safe; yet governments at all levels have not taken the advice of their own national safety experts.

“Lowering exposure limits will save lives, and that should be a good enough reason to act now. If Safe Work Australia is telling us the current exposure settings are too high to keep workers safe, then any further delays would be unforgivable.

“Every day, tradies in construction, nurses and technicians handling tissue samples, the workers who keep our drinking water safe, pharmaceutical workers, lab assistants and wood manufacturing workers are being exposed to toxic cancer-causing chemicals at unsafe levels.

“State and Territory Work Health and Safety Ministers have an opportunity to demonstrate that workers’ lives matter more than industry pressure to keep using these chemicals at dangerous levels.

“Across Europe and in countries like Canada, New Zealand, Singapore and Japan, these chemicals have already been limited. No worker in this country should be expected to take risks that other nations have already moved to reduce.”

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