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Government must act on incurable silicosis that affects 1 in 5 engineered stone workers

The ACTU calls on the Federal Government to urgently act on silicosis as 1 in 5 of those working with engineered stone are diagnosed with the incurable disease.

The National Dust Disease Taskforce was established two years ago to combat the deadly disease, and since then the Federal Government has done nothing to protect workers from this disease.

Workers across a wide range of industries are exposed to silica and other hazardous dusts. The ACTU demands the Federal Government protect workers by enacting the following:

1. A national regulation that bans uncontrolled cutting of high silica content engineered stone
2. All States and Territories to have a code of practice on high silica content engineered stone
3. A Regulation and Code of Practice covering all other work where silica exposure occurs
4. A national register for all those diagnosed with work related lung disease which includes all dust diseases
5. A reduction of Workplace Exposure Standard for Respirable Crystalline Silica to 0.02 mgm/m³ (the health based standard) from the recently adopted 0.05 mgm/m³
6. The establishment of compensation funds to support those suffering from dust diseases such as silicosis and coal workers pneumoconiosis, and their families. These funds should be financed by particular industries, on the basis that 'you pay for the harm you cause'.
7. A ban on importation and manufacture of high silica content engineered stone – with a 3 year staged approach to the ban, which would include:
 - Research alternatives to high silica content engineered stone material for benchtops
 - Development of an Australian-manufactured safer product
 - Financial incentives for safer product development
 - A regulatory approach that is similar to various Regulations and Codes of Practice used in the asbestos removal industry, such as licensing enterprises, with differing licensing requirements dependent upon the nature of work performed
 - Supply chain education and awareness
 - Retooling of the industry
 - Retraining of the workforce
 - Support for workers who are displaced by the ban

Quotes attributable to ACTU Assistant Secretary Liam O'Brien:

“Recent reports suggest as many as 1 in 5 engineered stone workers are affected by silicosis. Many of these are young workers who will face a lifetime living with the disease, sometimes hoping for a lung transplant.

“Exposure to high quantities of silica causes lung cancer, silicosis and autoimmune diseases like scleroderma. These diseases are entirely preventable and the Federal Government must ban high silica content engineered stone products and promote the use of safer alternatives.

“Australia has some of the highest rates of use of engineered stone in the world. Australian consumers would be shocked to discover the misery and harm caused by these products – unfortunately the Morrison Government has failed to educate consumers or ban the product.

“The workers compensation system must be reformed to ensure workers with chronic diseases caused by work are not thrown onto a social security system where their benefits are terminated after only two years. There should also be long term health, financial and vocational support and retraining assistance that will enable sufferers to return to safe and meaningful work.”

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