



Media release: the killer in your kitchen

Thursday 30 August

Fashionable stone benchtops in kitchens and bathrooms right around the nation have been exposed as a major health risk to workers, as Trades Hall warns that the existing Australian Standard for silica dust exposure puts workers at risk.

A new Trades Hall Standard, launching tomorrow, comes in response to a dramatic increase in the number of workers suffering silicosis and lung cancers caused by inhaling silica particles while manufacturing, cutting and installing compressed stone benchtops.¹ Silica occurs naturally in many materials, but is highly concentrated in the newly ubiquitous compressed stone. Respiratory physicians attribute the increase in silicosis diagnoses to the explosion in demand for compressed stone benchtops.²

Silica dust, which is so fine that it can enter the deepest part of the lungs, causes irreversible scarring on the lung tissue leading to silicosis and lung cancer. There is no known cure for silicosis; like asbestos, those who are exposed to crystalline silica dust through work or other activities face a possible death sentence.

The new Trades Hall Standard is a dramatic improvement on the existing standard, reducing the definition of safe exposure to silica to 0.025mg/m³ in an 8 hour time weighted average – the same concentration permitted under the United States' safety standard. The current Australian Standard permits Australian workers to be exposed to Silica levels four times greater than what is deemed safe in the United States.

Since last December, more than 100 people have put their names down on Slater and Gordon's National Silicosis Register to indicate that they believe that have been exposed to silica dust in the workplace.

QUOTES:

Luke Hilakari, Victorian Trades Hall Council Secretary:

- "Crystalline silica is the new asbestos, but Australians are simply not aware of the dangers involved in working with such a common substance as compressed stone."
- "Releasing our own safety standard is a huge step. We're doing it because the current Australian safety standards aren't keeping workers safe at work."

¹ Compressed stone benchtops are not considered hazardous when installed. The risk to workers is due to silica dust being breathed in while the material is being cut.

² [Report on proceedings before standing committee on law and justice: first review of the dust diseases and lifetime care and support schemes](#), NSW, 2017.

- “Asbestos exposure is still devastating communities and families. We don’t want another generation of workers to go through that. We must have better health and safety standards.”

Gerry Ayers, Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union Health & Safety Manager:

- “It is shameful that this insidious disease has not only reemerged, but appears to have manifested itself within our workforce. Both employers and regulators must act immediately to put a halt to this.”
- “Measures to control the hazards from silica are well known. Now is the time to adhere and enforce these measures – workers deserve and are legally entitled to the highest levels of protection – so far, this hasn’t been the case!”
- “Workers using silica based products shouldn’t have to live with an insidious time-bomb of potential disease and personal and family tragedy. Profitability of companies must not be allowed to overrule and override the health and safety of workers. Cost cutting practices must stop. The health and safety of our workers, their families and the community in general must come first.”

Claire Setches, Slater + Gordon senior lawyer:

- “The community still doesn’t understand the quick and insidious nature of the consequences of silica exposure – there is no cure and it is often fatal.”
- “Slater and Gordon has represented numerous workers – of all ages – who have died or are currently suffering as a result of the impact of silica exposure. We have also acted for countless families who have lost a loved one to a disease such as silicosis.”
- “We believe there needs to be a greater focus within workplaces on dust-control measures, the use of safety equipment and, most importantly, safe cutting and handling procedures.”
- “There is an urgent need for better standards and policing for controlling dangerous dust emissions and improved health surveillance and monitoring for worker.”

EVENT DETAILS:

Trades Hall Silica Safety Standard Launch

10am, Friday 31 August

Level 7, 540 Elizabeth St, Melbourne

Speakers: Wil Stracke (VTHC Assistant Secretary), Dr Ryan Hoy, Associate Professor Deborah Glass (Cancer Council), Gerry Ayres (CFMEU Health & Safety Manager)

MEDIA CONTACT:

Amy Fitzgerald | afitzgerald@vthc.org.au | 0432 056 663