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Call to save lives from RCS exposure - MinEx

Bernie Napp - Wed, 20 Dec 2017



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A survey showing that operators focus more on health checks than on assessing workers' exposure to respirable crystalline silica is a call for action to save lives, MinEx says.

In October-November, the extractives industry health and safety council surveyed the industry's actions to identify RCS exposure-related hazards, assess the risks, and check workers' health. The survey results were released yesterday.

MinEx CEO Wayne Scott said today the results showed that people are focused on health surveillance as opposed to the hazard.

"The fact is people are doing medicals for people. The difficulty with that is by the time silicosis is detected in the lungs, it's terminal."

"We need to get their focus on identifying the hazard and assessing how exposed workers are to these things."

A WorkSafe [factsheet](#) [2] produced in August on silica dust in the workplace says at least 600-900 people die each year from work-related disease in New Zealand.

In September WorkSafe released a 10-year strategic plan on [worker health](#) [3], which says that for every person that dies in the workplace, around 10 die of work-related illness.

That, and a general lack of knowledge of RCS risk within the industry inspired Scott to carry out the survey. His purpose was to identify how Minex could help the industry improve their understanding of RCS-related hazards, and act on them.

Survey results

Of 159 survey respondents, 84 per cent conduct health assessments of workers, and 79 percent include a lung function test.

Seventy-five per cent of respondents are aware of the approved code of practice on air quality in the extractives industry, and 55 per cent have conducted dust monitoring, 80 per cent of whom in accordance with relevant standards.

"While a large number of respondents are conducting health surveillance of workers, a number of sites are not conducting dust monitoring, and therefore may not have adequately assessed the risks of RCS exposure to workers," Scott says.

There is a call for action, he says. "Dust can be managed. It's not insurmountable."

The consequence of doing nothing is that more cases of silicosis will be diagnosed. While there is no looming epidemic, Scott says there is no room for complacency.

Silicosis is a terminal disease

Silicosis is a disease of the lungs. Very fine dust fibres get into the lungs, and the lungs cannot disperse them. They lodge in lung cavities, and cause agitation to lung tissue until a form of cancer begins to develop.

Silicosis is cumulative in its effects. The longer the exposure to RCS over time, the greater risk to workers of developing silicosis.

The risk of silicosis is increased by lifestyle factors, including smoking, and exposure to other fine particles.

The WorkSafe standard for RCS exposure is less than 0.1 milligrams per cubic metre of air volume over an eight-hour average.

Other work-related illnesses include asthma, some types of cancer, and mental illness.

Next steps for MinEx

MinEx has developed a training package on worker health, recently delivered to West Coast alluvial gold miners. It is available to the extractives industry and related professional associations.

MinEx has its [Guide to Worker Health in Extractives](#) [4] now posted on the MinEx website.

A flyer on RCS for industry is due for completion in mid-January.

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