

Australian ban a reminder for vigilance on silicosis risks

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A New Zealand health and safety organisation says it supports the total ban by Australia on engineered stone because of silicosis risks.

Wayne Scott is CEO of MinEx which represents the interests of workers in the extractives sectors, mining, quarrying and tunnelling. Five years ago, MinEx helped alert New Zealand to the risks posed in working with engineered stone which sees crushed stone mixed with resins to form benchtops and vanities. Silicosis has been diagnosed in hundreds of Australians working in engineered stone factories, with the accelerated levels of exposure leading to fatalities.

Australia is now the first nation in the world to ban engineered stone with federal and state ministers agreeing it will mostly take effect from July next year.

“MinEx supports this move,” says Scott. “It will put pressure on NZ suppliers of engineered stone. While some try to manage the risks, if Australian authorities don’t believe that’s possible, it’s hard to see how it can be achieved here.”

He says respirable crystalline silica (RCS) which causes advanced silicosis is generated in considerable volume by the cutting and grinding of engineered stone.

RCS is also found – in much smaller quantities – in soil, rocks, granite, sand, clay and concrete, presenting lower-level risks to workers in sectors including mining and quarrying.

“The Australian decision banning engineered stone is another reminder that our sectors do need to remain vigilant and not be complacent around exposure to RCS,” says Scott.

“Quarries and mines need to ensure they identify any worker exposure risks and put adequate controls in place to minimise or eliminate any exposure of workers to it.”

Controls in quarries include water suppression, dust extraction systems and enclosed cabs in vehicles. Educating extractive sector workers about RCS risks was again a feature this year in 16 regional health and safety workshops run annually by MinEx.

From July of this year, all quarry workers are required to have pre-employment medicals including x-rays and a measure of lung function, then five-yearly checks. However, Scott says no one in New Zealand is appropriately trained to detect silicosis on x-rays.

“I’ve written to the new Minister for Workplace Relations and Safety, Brooke van Velden, alerting her to that gap and seeking to meet her. We all need to be doing our best to reduce the risks of silicosis in any New Zealand workplace.”

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