

# MinEx calls for silicosis register

Colin Williscroft - Fri, 1 Mar 2024

MinEx wants a silicosis register established, similar to the asbestos register operated by WorkSafe.

Chief executive Wayne Scott says it should include a requirement for those analysing chest x-rays for silicosis to meet US competency standards for those assessments.

Another option may be for lung function tests from the extractives sector to require a second review by an experienced physician in Australia or the US, Scott says in MinEx's latest Train Brain newsletter.

In early December he wrote to Workplace Relations and Safety Minister Brooke van Velden and Health Minister Shane Reti, outlining how all workers in the New Zealand extractives sector have since July been required to have annual medicals which include lung function tests.

He told them that the absence of a silicosis register in New Zealand, like the one Australia has, coupled with a lack of occupational physicians competent to detect silicosis from those medicals, greatly concerns the MinEx board.

"The ministers have now been alerted to how a similar lack of competent assessment of lung function tests in Australia led to inaction there for a number of years."

Until x-rays were analysed in the US by competent physicians, the Australian extractives industry falsely believed there was no health issue with exposure to respirable crystalline silica – RCS – in its mines, quarries and tunnels.

"I've told the ministers this could certainly be the case in New Zealand."

Scott is due to meet with van Velden later this month.

Earlier this week, van Velden was asked at the education and workforce select committee whether she had any plans to follow Australia and introduce a ban on engineered stone production, due to concerns about silicosis.

She told the committee that she was awaiting advice from the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment on silicosis. She expects to receive that "in coming weeks" but until she has that advice on the range of different options available, she was unable comment further.

## Silicosis

Scott points out that New Zealand does have the capability to identify advanced cases of silicosis, but further measures are needed to ensure they are identified at an earlier stage.

The condition is caused by the inhalation of RCS, which is generated in considerable volume by cutting and grinding engineered stone, and at lower levels in mines and quarries.

Early detection of silicosis allows for medical interventions that can improve health outcomes for the person diagnosed and enables workplace issues to be identified to prevent further harm.

Last year, WorkSafe's chief inspector for extractives, Paul Hunt, said two cases of chronic silicosis had been identified at a quarry in New Zealand.

While the two identified cases were likely to be atypical, WorkSafe said they highlighted the importance of conducting routine health checks.

Accelerated silicosis typically develops in three to 10 years, while chronic silicosis usually develops from exposure over 20 years.

## Engineered stone

MinEx highlighted the dangers of engineered stone in New Zealand five years ago, after hundreds of Australians working in that industry had been diagnosed with accelerated silicosis.

Late last year Australian state and federal workplace ministers announced a ban on engineered stone due to the risk of silicosis to those working in the industry. That ban will mainly take effect from July.

Scott says that move 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 the Australian decision is another reminder that the mining and quarrying sector needs to remain vigilant about exposure to RCS.

"Enclosed factories where stone is routinely cut and polished can expose workers to much greater volumes of silica dust and risk than a quarry, tunnel or mine. That doesn't mean we can relax; far from it.

"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."

Those controls include water suppression, dust extraction systems and ensuring vehicles have enclosed cabs.

"Whatever the solution, the horrendous toll caused by RCS in Australia's manufactured stone industry is a canary in the mine. Our industry needs to step up its awareness, processes, monitoring and avoidance of RCS."

