

Worksite Silica Dust 'The Next Asbestos' **Michael West and Brad Norington**

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A WARNING that thousands could die from having inhaled sand dust on worksites across Australia has led to pressure for a Senate inquiry into what doctors believe could be a medical timebomb rivalling the James Hardie asbestos scandal.

Medical experts say that well-established evidence confirms an association between sandblasting and fatal lung disease that is still to appear in many older-generation workers not told in past decades to wear proper safety equipment.

Liberal senator Gary Humphries will join forces with Democrats leader Lyn Allison on Monday in pressing for a Senate inquiry to investigate the extent of the disease, known as silicosis, that can have an incubation period of 15 years or more.

Since the 1980s, sandblasting has been progressively banned or controlled by ensuring that workers wear face masks and breathing apparatus.

But thousands of workers from the 1960s and 1970s in mining, construction, shipping, tunnelling, spray painting, glass manufacturing, ceramics and cement production were exposed to silica particles because they did not use protective equipment while sandblasting.

David Bryant of Sydney University said silica was a potentially fatal cancer-producing dust that affected many workers.

Haydn Walters, director of medicine at Royal Hobart Hospital, said he believed many former sandblasters suffering from silica-induced injuries had not been diagnosed and their respiratory difficulties were attributed to other causes.

"It's a worldwide phenomenon," he said. "There is something about the very fine particles of freshly created silica. Silicosis is a nasty disease. It scars, shrinks and cavitates, then literally breaks down the lungs so people cough up black lumps of their own lung and they die of respiratory failure."

Thomas Faunce, senior lecturer in medicine and law at Australian National University, said sufficient documentation was available to justify a Senate inquiry.

Dr Faunce said the issue was potentially an Australia-wide problem, with evidence that inadequate protective measures continued after the risks were known.

"The evidence strongly suggests that the numbers of persons directly affected could number in the thousands," he said.

Senator Humphries said he was motivated by the case of Richard White, one of 55 sandblasters and painters who worked in ship maintenance in the 1970s. Mr White,

who has been diagnosed with silicosis, lost a compensation claim against his former employer, Dimet.

Senator Humphries said one outcome of a Senate inquiry could be an industry compensation fund for workers suffering from silicosis.

ACTU assistant secretary Richard Marles said dust-borne disease was the biggest workplace killer. "We are at the peak of the bell curve of those who are dying of dust diseases."

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