




Speech By
Hon. Grace Grace

MEMBER FOR MCCONNEL

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MINISTERIAL STATEMENTS

Silicosis

 **Hon. G GRACE** (McConnel—ALP) (Minister for Education and Minister for Industrial Relations) (10.15 am): The Palaszczuk government is absolutely committed to protecting the health and safety of Queensland workers. Last night I received a comprehensive briefing from senior Workplace Health and Safety Queensland officers about the emergence of a spike of silicosis claims for workers in the engineered stone benchtop manufacturing industry, and I briefed the Premier this morning.

Engineered stone is a relatively new building product which has exploded on the Australian market in the past decade and contains around 90 per cent crystalline silica compared with, for example, five per cent in natural marble stone. It poses no health threat if undisturbed. However, high levels of exposure and continued exposure to silica dust can cause a serious and debilitating illness called silicosis, which can be terminal. Silicosis is an aggressive form of pneumoconiosis.

In October 2017, Workplace Health and Safety Queensland launched an Australian-first compliance campaign of the engineered stone benchtop industry. This followed on from our parliamentary inquiry into coal workers' pneumoconiosis, which included silicosis. The compliance campaign involved an audit of 10 workplaces involved in working with engineered stone benchtops which uncovered extremely poor work practices including uncontrolled dry cutting and grinding, inadequate ventilation and a lack of adequate personal protection equipment such as respiratory masks.

Workplace Health and Safety Queensland has moved quickly to escalate this matter. From this week, there will be 22 specially trained safety inspectors on the ground to audit the remaining 150 manufacturers by the end of the year. Due to these audits, WorkCover Queensland has received 22 claims for compensation for silicosis and, overall, has received a total of 26 compensation claims. Of these, six cases are terminal, with a life expectancy of three to five years. Tragically, some of these workers are young, including a 27-year-old worker. In most cases the workers had no symptoms, with the disease only being detected through health checks by recently trained B-reader physicians.

This is alarming and my heart goes out to those workers and their families. That is why we have acted immediately to warn workers in this industry of the very serious risks of working with this product specifically when dry cutting and grinding the stone. Today I am informing all employers that dry cutting of engineered stone is prohibited and that enforcement action will be taken against any employer who fails to adequately protect its workers. In addition, the regulator has written to all Queensland based manufacturers to inform them of exactly what safety controls must be in place. An urgent safety alert has been issued today, along with guidelines for industry which detail the requirements for working safely with this product.

We are working towards developing the necessary regulations to prohibit dry cutting of stone, along with a code of practice to be finalised as soon as possible. Our priority is to ensure the immediate ceasing of dry cutting and grinding of this product and to ensure that these workers are adequately

compensated under our recently amended WorkCover scheme. I encourage workers in the engineered stone industry, and those who have previously worked in the industry, to undergo urgent health screenings through WorkCover Queensland and encourage them to contact WorkCover's hotline on 1300362128.

Unfortunately, this is a national health and safety issue which affects workers across the country. I have written to federal minister Kelly O'Dwyer and will contact her directly today to alert the federal government to the seriousness of this issue and to consider a national response including importation controls, new exposure standards and regulations. The health and safety of these workers must be paramount.