

**Submission
No 2**

INQUIRY INTO 2019 REVIEW OF THE DUST DISEASES SCHEME

Organisation: Suncorp Group Limited

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The Hon Niall Blair MLC
Committee Chair
Legislative Council Standing Committee on Law and Justice
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

By email: law@parliament.nsw.gov.au

Dear Mr Blair,

2019 SILICOSIS IN THE MANUFACTURED STONE INDUSTRY INQUIRY

Suncorp welcomes the opportunity to participate in the Law and Justice Committee's *2019 Review of the Workers Compensation (Dust Diseases) Scheme*. Suncorp supplies workers compensation claims management in NSW under the GIO and Vero brands, and provides workers compensation in the four Australian jurisdictions that are privately underwritten (Western Australia, Tasmania, ACT and NT).

We recognise the seriousness of the risk of silicosis in the manufactured stone industry across Australia, and acknowledge the timeliness of the committee's inquiry. Suncorp has raised our concerns regarding the emerging risk of silicosis with the federal Minister for Health, the Hon Greg Hunt MP. We have also established an internal Silicosis Working Group that has met over the past year to share insights across the company. This group will inform our strategy to prevent silicosis in privately underwritten states and ensure we provide the most appropriate assistance to affected workers.

Return of Silicosis Risk

Silicosis is not a new disease, having been present amongst stonemasons, miners, quarrymen and sand blasters in the 1920s. Through effective controls and safety equipment, the condition was almost completely eradicated in 1940s-1960s. Recent experience and studies has shown engineered stone is causing a significant increase in diagnosis of accelerated silicosis among workers exposed to cutting, drilling, crushing and polishing of manufactured stone bench tops.¹

In 2018 Queensland WorkCover received 22 silicosis claims within three weeks (including six diagnosed as terminal)². Queensland then undertook an audit to identify at-risk workers in late 2018 and identified a further 98 workers with silicosis, 15 of which are terminal. Over the four-month review more than 550 workplace breaches were issued due to unsafe work practices.³

¹ See *Artificial Stone Silicosis*. Kramer, Mordechai R, et al. 2012, CHEST Journal, pp. 419-424; *Experimental Evaluation of Respirable Dust and Crystalline Silica Controls During Simulated Performance of Stone Countertop Fabrication Tasks With Powered Hand Tools*. Johnson, David L, et al. 2017, Annals of Work Exposures and Health, pp. 711-723; *Outbreak of silicosis in Spanish quartz conglomerate workers*. Perez-Alonso, Aranzazu, et al. December 2013, International Journal of Occupational and Environmental Health, pp. 26-32.

² Grace, Hon. Grace. Safety alert issued for engineered stone benchtop workers. Queensland Government. [Online] 18 September 2018. <http://statements.qld.gov.au/Statement/2018/9/18/safety-alert-issued-for-engineered-stone-benchtop-workers>

³ See: www.abc.net.au/news/2019-02-21/silicosis-death-dust-audit-reveals-major-epidemic-worse-asbestos/10830452

While Suncorp is yet to receive a direct claim for silicosis from our Underwritten Workers' Insurance portfolio states, we are closely monitoring the situation across the industries at risk.

We welcome the NSW Government's proactive actions including the Manufactured Stone Industry Taskforce⁴, the icare Pitt St lung screening centre, and the SafeWork NSW Silica Roadshow. In addition to appropriate education of workers in the manufactured stone industry, we believe that there should be greater awareness of the silica risk that exists in homes where the manufactured stone is cut onsite. This could be included in consideration of the NSW Government's reform to the building industry.

Recommendations

We recommend that the NSW Government implement monitoring of current and new businesses that have exposure to silicosis risk. Audits should be conducted where practicable if there are concerns about the adequacy of workplace safety practices. Standards around household and builder/contractor record keeping would help track incidents and maintain accountability.

We encourage the NSW Government to advocate for a consistent national approach to identifying and managing silica risks. A standard definition of silicosis as a disease will promote certainty in the industry.

Similarly, a standard Australian wide education program will be vital to stem the progression of this emerging risk. Insights from audits conducted in Queensland and South Australia should inform the education package.

Whilst prevention is the preferred option, Federal and NSW Government funding of further research into silicosis treatment will provide options for workers who have contracted the disease.

Conclusion

In response to the emerging silica exposure risk, the committee should consider the following recommendations:

- i. NSW support for an Australia-wide education program into silica risk and risk reduction strategies.
- ii. NSW publishing data on silica exposure arising state-wide.
- iii. Review of Workers Compensation legislation to ensure silicosis is properly captured as a disease, as well as separate definitions to ensure the source of silicosis is captured in reporting.
- iv. Further investment in medical research around a cure for silicosis.

Suncorp is committed to working collaboratively with the Committee and relevant stakeholders to raise the level of awareness of the emerging silica risk. If you wish to discuss any of the points raised in this submission, please contact Georgia Lovell, Senior Advisor, Government, Industry and Public Policy on _____ or _____

Yours faithfully,

Sarah Hilt
A/Head of NSW Workers Compensation Claims
Personal Injury Insurance
Suncorp

⁴ NSW Government. Safety Taskforce to protect stone industry workers. Finance, Services & Innovation. [Online] 11 July 2018. <https://www.finance.nsw.gov.au/about-us/media-releases/safety-taskforce-protect-stone-industry-workers>.