

INQUIRY INTO 2019 REVIEW OF THE DUST DISEASES SCHEME

Organisation: Australian Engineered Stone Advisory Group (AESAG)

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22 October 2019

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 Review of the Dust Diseases scheme

The Australian Engineered Stone Advisory Group (AESAG) was established by Caesarstone Australia, Quantum Quartz and Smartstone Australia Australia's leading suppliers of engineered quartz surfaces and this submission is being made jointly by them.

A safe working environment for stonemasons fabricating engineered quartz surfaces is a major priority for the members of AESAG and the objective of AESAG is to encourage stonemasons to comply with WHS laws when fabricating the product.

AESAG Accreditation Program

AESAG has engaged Greencap Pty Ltd (a subsidiary of Wesfarmers Ltd), one of Australia's leading Occupational Hygienists/workplace safety consultants to:

- (a) develop a Health and Safety Guideline (based on WHS laws) focussing on managing the risks associated with the creation of Respirable Crystalline Silica (RCS) when fabricating the product; and
- (b) manage the process of Accrediting fabricators who comply with the Guidelines.

Once registered, fabricators will have on site verification by Greencap of compliance with the Guideline and upon achieving a satisfactory level of compliance will be regarded as “Accredited”.

The aim is to complete the accreditation of our customers by September 2020.

As we do not have the authority to compel stonemasons to become accredited, we request that Governments across Australia support the program and also assist fabricators meet costs which on an annual basis are \$150 for each fabricator to join the accreditation program and between \$3,000 and \$4,000 for on-site verification, the costs depending on the size of the workplace and logistics in relation to the review.

We also request that Governments fund the cost of silicosis testing of all workers who are currently, or who may have been, exposed to RCS as a consequence of being in the industry.

Full details of the accreditation program are on our website www.aesag.com.au.

Product Safety

Engineered quartz surfaces are an advanced solution for kitchen countertops, bathroom vanities, flooring, wall cladding and other internal applications.

They are typically manufactured from over 90% quartz and high-quality polymer resins and pigments.

Quartz surfaces are in use today in millions of homes around the world, and in many environments that require the strictest standards of cleanliness and sterility, including the Starbucks Coffee chain in the US and the McDonald's chain in Australia.

Engineered quartz products are absolutely safe as manufactured, prior to fabrication and after being installed.

Stonemason exposure to RCS can be effectively managed if the correct safety procedures and guidelines are followed while fabricating the products and if followed the likelihood of detectable silicosis should be negligible.

This view is endorsed by SafeWork Australia and SafeWork NSW, both of whom provide comprehensive information on safe fabrication, and is also the view of the Australian Institute of Occupational Hygienists.

Presence of silica in manufactured products

Governments around Australia are rightly focusing on workplace safety and, in our view, suggestions that engineered quartz products be banned are impractical and would have a detrimental economic impact on many industries.

Common silica containing materials and products include stone products (natural and composite), composite dental fillings, glass, manufactured timber, bricks, cement, asphalt, drywall and some plasterboards, grout, mortar, tiles and even some plastic material.

Besides our industry, silica dust exposure can occur in many other industries, including mining, road construction, tunnelling and building construction.

The risk of exposure is not in the manufactured products but in activities that release RCS into the air and each industry that encounters RCS has safety requirements regulated by law.

Government Responses Supported by AESAG

AESAG is represented on the bodies established by the NSW and Queensland Governments to address silicosis and we are willing to do the same with the Federal and other state governments and territories.

We urge all states and territories to adopt the following measures:

- Mandatory testing of all workers exposed to RCS for silicosis and related illnesses
- Mandatory reporting of persons with silicosis by health and safety professionals
- A ban on dry cutting/polishing/forming of engineered quartz products
- Adoption of the AESAG accreditation program through legislation so that fabricators being "Accredited" is a legal requirement
- Funding of the accreditation program (as outlined above).

Silica dust exposure level

Safe Work Australia recently invited comment on a proposed silica dust workplace exposure standard of 0.02 mg/m³ (8-hour Time Weighted Average). This compares to the current regulated level of 0.1 mg/m³.

We believe there are practical difficulties for fabricators in our industry achieving the WES suggested by Safe Work Australia and compliance with the proposed WES would be difficult to monitor.

Our proposal is the WES level be stipulated at 0.05 mg/m³ and that compliance be phased in over three years to give fabricators time to upgrade their work practices to the required standard.

We appreciate your willingness to consider these proposals and would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to further discuss any questions/issues.

Yours sincerely

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