

Date: 9 February 2020

Calls for workers at risk of silicosis to hold NSW employers to account

NSW government insurance and care provider, icare NSW, is calling on at-risk workers to hold their employers to account and ensure they receive regular, ongoing screening for silica-dust exposure.

Dr Nick Allsop, icare Group Executive Care, says while more than 7,600 examinations for silica-dust exposure have been conducted by icare since 2017, one-off or irregular screening isn't good enough.

"It's a legal requirement for all employers in NSW to provide health monitoring for staff at risk of exposure to crystalline silica – not just once, but on an ongoing basis, in accordance with Work, Health and Safety Guidelines" Dr Allsop said.

"We have definitely seen the demand for screening for silica dust exposure grow in all corners of the state since 2017," he said.

icare has experienced a 328 per cent increase in silica related screenings between 2017/18 and 2018/19.

"We attribute this increasing demand to the growing national conversation and the excellent work of SafeWork NSW and their Roadmap 2022 program, which is reaching those small employers we haven't been able to reach in the past, particularly in the manufactured stone industry" Dr Allsop said.

"While it's great that we're seeing the screening numbers continue to rise year-on-year, the rapid increase indicates that not all employers were compliant with their obligation to refer their workers in the past.

"Preventing harmful exposure is the first and most important priority. Increased awareness of the risks associated with crystalline silica will hopefully lead to more precautions being taken by those working with silica containing products.

"However, it is crucial that workers are vigilant and ensure they receive the ongoing screening they are entitled to.

"Regular, ongoing screening is critical. It means we can detect any abnormalities early and give you the best chance of preventing further exposure and damage to your lungs.

Sixty-three cases of silicosis, with varying levels of severity, have been detected through the 2047 assessments conducted by icare screening services between 1 July 2019 and 31 December 2019.

"While we have seen an increase in detections in the last six months, NSW has been providing a subsidised lung screening service for workers potentially exposed to hazardous dusts in the workplace continuously for almost 20 years.

“This long period of screening has allowed early detection in NSW over many years.

“Don’t put it off. If you think you may have been exposed to hazardous dusts in the workplace and have never had a lung health screen, or it’s been a long time since your last screening, know what you are entitled to. Speak to your employer or get in touch with icare,” he said.

icare NSW provides three different options for lung health screening. Bookings can be made with our medical centre in the Sydney CBD, our mobile respiratory testing unit or with your local GP. Employers can choose the right service option depending on location and size of their workforce. Bookings with icare services can be made by calling [13 94 44](tel:139444) or by emailing lungscreen@icare.nsw.gov.au

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About icare NSW

Insurance and Care NSW (icare) protects, insures and cares for the people, businesses and assets of NSW. icare’s Dust Diseases Care scheme provides no-fault workers compensation for people who have developed a dust disease from occupational exposure to hazardous dust in NSW. For more information, visit: <http://bit.ly/31ielHU>

About SafeWork NSW’s Roadmap 2022 Program

SafeWork NSW’s Work and Health Safety Roadmap 2022 includes visits to about 9,000 businesses in NSW to reduce worker risks and eliminate injuries and silicosis disease associated with exposure to respirable crystalline silica. For more information, visit: <https://www.safework.nsw.gov.au/roadmap>