

Media Release

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BETTER SUPPORT FOR WORKERS AND FAMILIES AFFECTED BY SILICA

The Andrews Labor Government is strengthening health and safety laws to provide more support to workers and families affected by the debilitating effects of silicosis and similar occupational diseases.

Recognising the progressive and ongoing nature of diseases such as silicosis, changes in the *Workplace Safety Legislation and Other Matters Amendment Bill 2021*, introduced today, will mean workers with eligible diseases will not need to prove that their injury has stabilised to access lump sum payments.

It will also allow injured workers who have already received compensation for silica-related diseases to make a subsequent application for damages if they develop a further related disease or injury down the track.

The Bill provides greater support to Victorians who have received a lung transplant due to a work-related injury and extends compensation for counselling services to families of workers diagnosed with an eligible disease.

People who work with engineered stone, commonly used for bench tops, are at risk of exposure to respirable crystalline silica dust, which can lead to deadly lung and respiratory diseases, including silicosis.

Tragically, four workers have died from silica related illness and WorkSafe has accepted 59 claims for silica related diseases since the start of this year.

The changes introduced to Parliament today are in line with the Labor Government's *Silica Action Plan*, which has also permanently banned dry-cutting, introduced Australia's first licensing scheme for businesses working with engineered stone and provided free health screenings for past and present stonemasons.

Further reforms in the Bill will improve access and deliver better support to families of deceased workers, with weekly pension payments for children with disability to be extended from the age of 16 to the age of 25.

The Bill expands the range of incidents that WorkSafe must be notified of to include infectious diseases and illnesses, as well as near misses.

It also updates the grounds for issuing prohibition notices and an inspectors' power to give directions, either orally or in writing, to better capture non-immediate yet serious health and safety risks such as exposure to silica dust.

Quotes attributable to Minister for Workplace Safety Ingrid Stitt

"Silica-related illnesses have a debilitating impact on far too many workers in the stonemason industry. This strong action strengthens our support for workers affected by this terrible disease."

"We're strengthening our laws to better protect Victorians from the full range of risks that exist in the modern workplace and make sure employers are accountable for their workers' health and safety."