

Do you Breathe Freely?

Help on how to ensure people breathe clean air at work has become available.

Concerns around the air we breathe have been given a lot of attention. Viruses, silica dust, asbestos, solvents, erionite (a mineral in volcanic deposits), metal fume all can contribute to people breathing in air that can harm them. Often the harm is longer term – not noticeable for some time. The New Zealand Occupational Hygiene Society (NZOHS) is a group of professionals who try to help prevent people being harmed from the air they breathe at work.

Silicosis (including accelerated, acute and chronic) – is a serious, debilitating lung disease linked to exposure to crystalline silica. Manufacture and installation of kitchens (particularly “engineered stone” benchtops) has recently been internationally recognized as the cause of very preventable deaths of workers as young as 25 due to the damage to their lungs from silica in the air they breathe.

In Queensland, health screening of 1040 stonemasons has shown over 200 have work related lung disease. Measurements of exposure to crystalline silica in related New Zealand industries is also concerning and NZOHS members are working actively with industry to reduce risk (including Breathe Freely NZ).

International research and governmental information has also shown greater risks associated with welding and exposure to metal fume. Welding is linked to higher rates of cancer. There are issues around availability and effectiveness of use of respirators (or “dust masks”).

People are increasingly concerned around these risks – and finding useful information can be difficult. Some assume the worst (and are fearful of working with any substance), others assume the best and are casual, ignoring the potential (but unknown) risk.

NZOHS has taken a proactive approach and decided to provide some further information for people at work regarding the potential hazards AND what to do to reduce the risk and prevent health impacts (long and short term). We are launching a web site and will be carrying out roadshow events in construction over the next 6 months.

www.breathefreely.co.nz

NZOHS Breathe Freely team

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