Silicosis: The New Asbestos?

By Kevin Jones

It began in the Weekend Australian newspaper on June 18, a workplace safety-related article on page 3. That was enough to get any safety practitioner’s interest.

The Australian Democrats joined ACT Liberal Senator Gary Humphries in calling for a Senate inquiry into lung disease that experts warn could rival asbestos.

Silicosis is a fatal lung disease caused by inhaling sand dust.

Medical experts have well-established evidence confirming a link between sandblasting and the fatal lung disease which is starting to appear in workers who have been exposed to silica particles.

Leader of the Australian Democrats, Senator Lyn Allison, said a Senate Inquiry should investigate the health impact of exposure to silica and other hazardous material in the workplace.

Thousands of workers in the 1960s and 1970s worked for years on end, breathing in these deadly particles without any respiratory protection, long after these practises had been banned in other states and industries Senator Allison said.

The deadly results from this exposure are becoming more and more prevalent and it is time we assessed the real impact of the disease.

Sandblasting has been progressively banned since the 1980s or controlled through the use of face masks and breathing apparatus.

Senator Allison said given the disease has an incubation period of 15 years or more, many sandblasters suffering from silica-induced injuries have still not been diagnosed, or their illness has been attributed to an alternative cause.

This is a potentially disastrous nation-wide problem with evidence suggesting the effects could well emulate the James Hardie asbestos scandal, Senator Allison said.

This Inquiry is urgently needed to assess the health, financial and social burden of the disease and to look at ways to compensate for this disaster.

Her call for the inquiry was supported in the article by Dr Faunce of Australian National University who said that there was sufficient documentation available to justify an inquiry.

Senator Humphries said there was clear evidence that a number of workers affected by lung diseases and the connection with workplace exposure deserved to be comprehensively examined.

“Australia was engaging in practices, particularly related to sandblasting, long after the unprotected use of sandblasting techniques had been banned in other parts of the world,” he said.

“In Britain, for example, sandblasting in an unprotected way was banned as early as 1949, but in the 1970s people (in Australia)... were still engaging in those practices in their workplaces without any form of protection whatsoever.”

The Construction Forestry Mining Energy Union, not surprisingly, has thrown its weight behind a Senate inquiry into the extent of silicosis, and the ongoing risk of silica exposure to workers in many industries.

CFMU NSW Secretary Andrew Ferguson said many people were comparing silica dust to asbestos; a silent killer that takes years to strike.

“Medical experts have confirmed that exposure to fine silica particles can cause silicosis, which is a deadly disease not dissimilar to Mesothelioma, and other asbestos related diseases,” he said.

“This is a major issue for the thousands of Australian workers unknowingly exposed in the past due to poorer work practices, but it is also an ongoing issue of concern for those currently employed in industries where silica dust is a major problem, and exposure is potentially ongoing.

“In Sydney, with large scale tunnel projects cutting through sandstone and large amounts of excavation for building work, there are still thousands of workers, and even local residents, who may be at risk from silica exposure.

“This Senate inquiry needs to occur immediately, and the findings must be quickly acted upon, unlike many recent inquiries, to make sure silica does not become the new asbestos.”

Several speakers on this issue mention a possible parallel with the James Hardie Asbestos row but the CFMEU is closer to the issue. We should not be looking at silicosis solely as a compensation issue as the unsafe work practices continue today. Any possible inquiry needs to acknowledge the continuing risk of inhaling silica dust and coordinate a stop to the use of the product until adequate and enforceable control measures can be introduced.

It would be irresponsible to acknowledge a hazard and allow the hazard to continue while an inquiry focuses on compensation. The best way to minimise compensation is to eliminate the hazard.

A longer article on the call for a silicosis inquiry is available on page 20 of the Weekend Australian or by entering “silicosis” at the website http://www.news.com.au/

Continued on page 2

Source: CFMEU, AAP, Australian Democrats, The Australian
One in 10 NSW kids work more than 15 hours a week: report
June 19 2005

Nearly one in 10 children aged 12 to 16 work more than 15 hours a week, a new study has found. A groundbreaking report released today by the NSW Commission for Children and Young People reveals new information about the working experiences of 11,000 high school students aged between 12 and 16 years.

“The Children at Work study is the first of its kind in Australia to explore children’s work and the important contribution they make to businesses and the community,” said NSW Commissioner for Children and Young People Gillian Calvert.

“The majority of kids we surveyed said they enjoy their work because they learn new skills, meet new people, it makes them feel more responsible and they like having their own money to spend. However, the report also highlighted some serious concerns such as safety, and the verbal and physical harassment of children in the workplace.”

The research shows that there is considerable diversity to kids’ work, from babysitting and working in retail outlets to making deliveries, teaching and helping on the family farm.

Other key findings include:
• Over half of children in Years 7 to 10 work in NSW
• Over two-thirds of children get paid for working
• Most kids work less than 6 hours a week but nearly one in 10 work more than 15 hours
• More girls than boys work and children’s work hours increase with age
• Kids in rural areas are nearly twice as likely to work than kids in metropolitan areas
• Sydney’s children are paid the highest rates and work longer hours
• Children living in the most disadvantaged areas are more likely to be seriously injured
• Kids who work spend more time on homework and other household tasks than kids who don’t work.

“Nothing of this size or kind has been done in Australia before and it gives us a clearer picture of children’s work experiences and the way that children’s work impacts on their well-being,” Ms Calvert said.

A taskforce including children is being set up to closely examine issues raised by the Children at Work report. The taskforce will develop recommendations for government, non-government, industry and the community to help protect kids and keep their work experiences positive and enjoyable.


HAMSA Westralia parents elated after ADI guilty verdict
18 June 2005

Parents of sailors killed in the 1998 HMAS Westralia fire have welcomed a Perth court’s decision to find defence contractor ADI guilty of failing to provide a safe workplace.

Brian Smith and Lyndon Pelly are the parents of Shaun Smith and Megan Pelly, who were among four sailors who perished in the Navy fuel tanker’s engine room blaze.

They say they are ecstatic at the decision handed down by Magistrate Peter Malone in Perth Magistrate’s Court yesterday.

Mr Malone ruled ADI had failed in its obligation to provide a safe working environment by installing inappropriate flexible fuel hoses on the HMAS Westralia, resulting in the deadly fire.

The decision came only a day after a Senate inquiry found the Australian Defence Force should be stripped of much of its power to investigate complaints of abuse and crime.

Mr Smith and Mr Pelly say the ADI ruling will put further pressure on the federal government to ensure positive change in military inquiry processes.

The Senate inquiry into Australia’s military justice system heard stories of suicide, racism and violence, drug use and abuse of power in training schools and cadet units.

Families told of their children taking their own lives after being humiliated by fellow personnel and re-abused by the justice system, which often took years without a proper result.

The report’s key recommendation was that all suspected criminal activity be referred to state civilian police for investigation and prosecution before civilian courts and that suspected criminal activity outside Australia be investigated by federal police.

Perth man Brian Smith, whose son Petty Officer Shaun Smith, 29, died with three others on HMAS Westralia when fire engulfed the engine room on May 5, 1998, said he had campaigned for years for a change in the military inquiry processes.

“I’m elated that our work of seven years ... has finally developed into something,” Mr Smith said. “The senators coming out and saying ‘this system is broken, it is definitely no good and can’t be fixed, it has to be absolutely revamped’, I think it is tremendous. It is just not the suicides, it really started with Westralia when we kept pushing, saying the (military) board of inquiry was wrong, it was a whitewash.”

In Perth Magistrates Court today, Magistrate Peter Malone convicted ADI of failing in its obligation to provide a safe workplace by installing inappropriate flexible fuel hoses on the warship, resulting in a fire in 1998.

ADI, which was charged following an investigation by Comcare, the federal government’s workers’ compensation insurer, last year pleaded not guilty to the charge and a trial began on May 3. During the trial, Commonwealth prosecutor Stephen Hall, SC, said ADI had not followed the navy’s instructions to investigate if the switch from rigid to flexible fuel hoses was appropriate, and did not have qualified people advising on, or approving, the work.

He said ADI, as the government contractor, was obliged to ensure the hoses were fit for use, and in not doing so, had exposed naval personnel to harm and breached the Commonwealth Occupational Health and Safety Act.

An ADI spokesman said today the company was reviewing the court’s decision.

Half scholarships not linked with IOSH
17 June 2005

The following statement was issued by IOSH in the United Kingdom on June 17.

“IOSH (the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health), Europe’s largest body for occupational safety and health (OSH) professionals, wishes to make clear that it is not linked with “half scholarships” currently being offered to the IOSH 2006 Conference by an organisation called ‘OHS Daily News’ to OSH professionals in Australia and New Zealand.

The “scholarships” are offered via an email from the “Editor” (no name) of the publication and on applying, we are informed, applicants have been requested to send money. IOSH has not set ticket prices for IOSH 06 yet, nor have we started to sell tickets.”

IMPORTANT NOTICE

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Continued from page 2

**Tasmania’s Law Reform Institute has released a report into “Corporate Manslaughter”**

June 17 2005

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The Minister for Infrastructure, Energy and Resources, Bryan Green, and the Attorney-General and Minister for Justice, Judy Jackson, said that the paper raised issues associated with legislative remedies where death or injury occurs as a result of the activities of organisations.

“Following the State ALP Conference in 2004 the State Government decided to undertake research into whether there was a need to introduce industrial manslaughter legislation,” Mr Green said.

“It is timely that this issues paper has been released”, Ms. Jackson commented, “As the outcome of the comments received, together with any recommendations, will be useful in considering possible legislative changes.”

Both Ministers encourage input from any stakeholder, organisation or interest group by the response closure date of 1 August.

Below is a statement from the Law Reform Institute relating to the Issues Paper.

“This new paper is concerned with the criminal law that applies when corporations and other entities wrongfully cause the death or serious injury of a natural person. This is most likely to be relevant to workplace deaths and injuries when he was caught beneath the wheels of the vehicle,” a police spokeswoman said.

The traffic accident investigation squad and workplace health and safety are still investigating the incident.

Man Dies After Being Caught Beneath Big Rig

June 22 2005

A man has died after being caught beneath the wheels of a moving big rig in far north Queensland.

Police said 58-year-old John Magann was loading an excavator on to the truck when it slipped and rolled backwards about 11.40am (AEST) yesterday at Jungarra near Cairns.

Police said it appeared Mr Magann, of Cairns, tried to enter the cabin of the prime mover, with a semi-trailer attached, while it was moving in a bid to regain control of the truck.

“Initial investigations indicate that the man suffered fatal injuries when he was caught beneath the wheels of the vehicle,” a police spokeswoman said.

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A Queensland Rail spokeswoman said around 45 fully laden wagons and four locomotives came off the tracks around 2am (AEST) at the Coppabella marshalling yards, west of Mackay. She said the coal train “fell into” another stationary train at the yards.

“There is significant track damage and overhead lines and rolling stock damage,” she said. “The best estimate we have at this stage is that it will be closed for several days. They are working on getting trains around the site by using other lines.”

The train which was derailed was coming from Goonyella Mine. The track is the major route to the Dalrymple Bay Coal Terminal - operated by Prime Infrastructure - and Hay Point Coal Terminal owned and operated by the BHP Billiton Mitsubishi Alliance. Nobody was injured in the accident. Queensland Rail investigators were at the site this morning.

**SWAT Hits Dangerous Roadside Work Practices.**

24 June 2005

WorkSafe is extending a state-wide campaign to improve the safety of roadside workers and reduce the number of injuries and deaths among them.

The SWAT (Safety for Workers and Traffic) campaign launched late last year proved successful in highlighting the need for safety with over 700 site visits by WorkSafe inspectors across the state.

The new program begins on 1 July and will involve inspectors looking at all types of roadside workplaces, including those where work is carried out on the road reserve.

As part of the project, a radar speed unit is being trialled at various worksites throughout Victoria.

WorkSafe’s Construction & Utilities Program Director, Geoff Thomas said more than 200 notices were issued during the first phase of the campaign requiring employers and workers to change the way they were working to reduce risks.

**Collaboration raises the bar on forklift safety**

22 June 2005

The dangers of forklifts in Victorian workplaces are being highlighted in new industry guidance material launched today by WorkSafe Victoria.

WorkSafe’s Executive Director, John Merritt, said forklifts had killed 54 Victorians since 1985 and injured many more.

The most recent death was in April at Laverton when a man was struck by the falling load from a forklift.

“Forklift safety is the responsibility of everyone who works in the area of the workplace where a forklift is used,” Mr Merritt said.

“Forklifts are dangerous machines. They are capable of causing serious injury or death if used incorrectly. Workers need to know what they are doing is safe.”

WorkSafe’s 24-page booklet ‘Forklift safety – reducing the risk, forklift instability’ reminds employers, forklift operators and others in the workplace that if the machines are not used safely there is a high risk of serious injury or death.

“It won’t be intended, but equally, it won’t be an ‘accident’ as these incidents can be prevented. In places where forklifts are used, everyone needs to understand the potential risks and work to eliminate them,” Mr Merritt said.

Source: WorkSafe Victoria

**Laws to Modernise OHS Introduced Into Parliament**

23 Jun 2005

Laws to streamline outdated occupational health and safety requirements have been introduced into the federal parliament.

The proposed laws would make it easier for both employees and employers to decide how best to reduce any risks to workplace health and safety. Previous laws effectively denied the right of more employees to be involved in occupational health and safety at their workplace.

The bill enhances consultation between employers and employees by facilitating a more direct relationship between them to address health and safety issues. Debate has been adjourned.

**Near Miss for Coal Train Derailment**

June 24 2005

Coal supplies to the Dalrymple Bay and Hay Point coal terminals are expected to be delayed for several days after a train derailment in central Queensland’s Bowen Basin.
Continued from page 4

"There is a lot of room for improvement and we will be working in partnership with employers and workers to ensure that the right safety measures are in place," Mr Thomas said.

"As we have seen with past tragedies, roadside work can be extremely hazardous, not just because of the work being done, but also with passing traffic which may be travelling faster than the speed limit for the works area. "Our message is don't be surprised if an inspector on their way to visit a factory stops at a site where some unrelated activity like landscaping or tree lopping work is underway."

"This is a shared responsibility between employers and workers who need to have the right safety measures in place for their particular workplace, but also motorists who must observe roadworks speed limits."

Source: WorkSafe Victoria

**Accident-prone Mondays**

**June 26 2005**

Monday is the day you are mostly likely to be injured at work, a report shows.

CGU Insurance has found workplace injuries are 20 per cent more common on Mondays than Fridays.

The research showed that after Monday, the risk of being injured decreased and Friday was the safest working day.

The study revealed:

- The rate of workplace injuries dropped steadily throughout the working week;
- Sprains and strains were the most common workplace injuries;
- The lower back was the most common body part to be injured; and
- Workplace injuries are 20 per cent more common on Mondays compared with Fridays.

Melbourne’s CGU Safety and Risk Services spokesperson Kristine Haseldine said Monday was often regarded as the least favourite day, possibly because it was the day when most accidents happened.

“This research suggests that many people find it difficult to make the transition from the relaxation and enjoyment of their weekends to starting the working week,” she said.

"Lack of sleep over the weekend and the effects of alcohol and other drugs may be contributing factors to the increased incidence of workplace accidents on Mondays," Ms Haseldine said.

Ms Haseldine said many people started new jobs on Mondays and might not be familiar with new work environments.

"And given that the majority of public holidays occur on a Monday, if all things were equal Monday should have actually less workplace injuries than other days of the week, instead the rate is 20 per cent higher," Ms Haseldine said.

Ms Haseldine said workers should identify hazards and put risk controls in place to prevent injuries.

"Employers have a legal obligation to ensure the health and safety of their employees and they should make sure new employees are aware of hazards involved in the job," she said.

“Immediate induction for employees, especially those using machinery, tools or involved in physical activity, is crucial to workplace safety.”

The insurance company based the findings on an assessment of 192,000 workers compensation claims across Australia between 2001 and 2004

**Health Union Calls For Government Inquiry Into Ambulances**

**June 26 2005**

A leaked report showing that a fleet of ageing country ambulances frequently broke down highlighted the need for a government inquiry into the vehicles’ safety, a health union said today.

The Health Services Union today called on the Victorian government to investigate the state’s fleet of more than 150 GMC ambulances described as “ticking time bombs”.

The call comes after internal papers obtained by a Melbourne newspaper (Eds: Sunday Herald Sun) revealed that 13 Rural Ambulance Victoria (RAV) GMC vehicles experienced mechanical breakdowns and engine failures between December and April.

Health Services Union spokeswoman Terrie Seymour said an assessment of the vehicles was necessary to ensure that the ambulances were safe for paramedics, patients and the community.

“The high level of mechanical failure in these vehicles is not acceptable,” she said.

“These ambulances are ticking time bombs.”

“The Bracks government cannot just stand by and ignore these problems. They must urgently order an independent inquiry into these shocking failures.”

Senior RAV officer Wayne Dyer, who was in charge of health and safety for six months last year, said yesterday that safety issues were systematically covered up, according to the newspaper report.

Mr Dyer said that earlier this year he was ordered by management to hide an independent report on the failure of GMC ambulances from Worksafe.

He said he was forced out of the organisation on stress leave after refusing to deny at a discrimination hearing that a manager told an employee to ignore certain safety issues.

RAV today said Mr Dyer’s allegations were being investigated internally.

The organisation’s corporate communications manager Paul Bird said ambulance safety was not a problem.

“We reject any allegations that our vehicles are unsafe,” he said.

The allegations come weeks before the inquest into the deaths of paramedics Robert Bland, 50, and Phillip Oakley, 33, who were rushing to a car accident when their GMC ambulance careered off a bend and slammed into a tree near Healesville in January on January 2 last year.

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This weekly news bulletin is produced on behalf of the Safety Institute of Australia (Victoria Division) by Workplace Safety Services Pty Ltd.

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