

Coal Services highlights silica dust as an emerging issue

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Managing and minimising health-related risks was a key topic at the 2019 NSW Mining Health, Safety, Environment & Community Conference in Pokolbin this week. Speaking at the event was Coal Services' Senior Medical Officer, Dr David Meredith, whose overview of dust disease came with the warning that a greater focus is needed to protect against silicosis.

The full spectrum of coal mine dust lung disease includes coal workers pneumoconiosis (CWP or black lung), silicosis, mixed dust lung disease, dust-related diffuse fibrosis, emphysema and chronic bronchitis. Dr Meredith compared the current situation in NSW against the experience of Queensland and the United States.

'The coal workers health surveillance system in NSW is one of the most robust in the world. The review of chest x-rays is a critical part of the surveillance – we look for and report on any abnormality – not just dust disease,' he explained.

'Since January 2016, we (CS Health) have seen more than 59,000 medicals and nearly 52,000 chest x-rays. Of these we referred 48 to respiratory physicians for further investigation. Four of these have been identified with a coal mine dust lung disease; one each of simple CWP, silicosis, mixed dust disease and progressive massive fibrosis.'

Health research has confirmed that respirable crystalline silica is much more likely to be harmful to workers' health than coal dust. Respirable crystalline silica is an issue that affects many other industries, well beyond coal and has been identified as an emerging issue for those involved in demolition work, tunnelling, quarry work, air-polishing concrete, foundry work, bricklaying, stone masonry and the making of glass and ceramics.

Dr Meredith noted that the NSW coal mining industry operates under a regulatory framework providing prevention, detection, enforcement and education strategies that are essential to protect workers from harm in the future.

'What we are seeing in the stonemasonry industry across Australia is devastating. For our industry it is a painful reminder that we must never take the effectiveness of controls and regular health monitoring for granted. There has been increased focus on awareness and education across the industry and we need this to continue, particularly in the open cut coal mining and metalliferous sectors.'

Coal Mines Technical Services, a business unit of Coal Services, conducts statutory dust monitoring across NSW. However; monitoring workplace exposure levels is just part of the

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program – the insights and education arising from the data is critical to ensuring workers are protected.

Kerrie Burton, Senior Occupational Hygiene Specialist at Coal Services, was invited by Peabody's Wilpinjong mine to co-present on their respirable dust journey at the conference, and in particular the results of their dust monitoring program.

'The program undertaken at Wilpinjong is commendable. It demonstrates that a proactive approach to dust exposure monitoring for a broad range of work groups provides essential data for mines to identify areas or tasks that potentially present a respiratory health risk for workers and review the effectiveness of dust control measures,' she explained.

'Risk-based monitoring, where we look at similar exposure groups and their airborne dust exposure risk, and workplace education around operator positioning and respiratory protection are also critical elements to ensuring workers are protected from dust,' she added.

Dr Meredith concluded: 'Diseases arising from dust exposure are entirely preventable. Keeping workers out of the dust is paramount, as well as looking at improvements for monitoring, risk identification and education. Legislated exposure limits alone do not keep you safe.'

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About Coal Services:

Coal Services is an industry-owned organisation committed to providing critical services and expertise to the NSW coal mining industry. We operate a Specialised Health and Safety Scheme that provides an integrated suite of services aimed at preventing injury and illness in the workplace. These include occupational health and safety, workers compensation, mines rescue and training.

We work in collaboration with employers, workers, Government departments and other industry partners to help identify, assess, monitor and control many risks inherent in the NSW coal mining industry. Together, we work to protect the health and safety of those working in the industry through prevention, detection, enforcement and education.

We are jointly owned by two shareholders, the NSW Minerals Council and the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU). Our purpose, vision and values are aligned to focus on the safety and health of our industry and its workers.