



BREATHE FREELY Australia



Controlling exposures to
prevent occupational lung disease
in the construction industry



Do you
breathe freely?

www.breathefreelyaustralia.org.au

99% health

In UK, approx 13,000 died from work related disease



1% safety

In UK, 133 workers died in accidents at work

These figures are for British Industry as a whole.
However, the picture is likely to be the same in the Construction Industry.

HSE Statistics 2013/14

Treat health like safety and **breathe freely**

Every year in the UK, about 13,000 people die from diseases which were caused by the work that they do, or used to do. Unfortunately in Australia, we do not have adequate records to determine this number however the recent emergence of accelerated silicosis in workers of engineered stone have brought the need for a preventative program in Australia, to the fore.

What isn't well understood, is that we can protect workers' health and actually prevent most of these occupational deaths *through good occupational hygiene practice*. Or to put it simply, by recognising the hazards, evaluating the risks, and controlling exposures. People at work - that means everyone, employers and employees - need to recognise what the greatest hazards in the workplace actually are and properly understand the real risks these pose to workers' health. Then they need to control their exposures to them.

It's time to start managing health like we manage safety in our workplaces.

AIOH is the professional society representing qualified occupational hygienists in Australia, and we understand the scale of the problem. We also know that it can change, and we know how to help make that change happen.

That's where our ***Breathe Freely Australia*** campaign comes in.

Breathe Freely Australia

A collaborative approach

The UK BOHS launched this initiative on 28 April 2015 in partnership with UK HSE, Land Securities, Mace and Constructing Better Health. In its first year, Breathe Freely attracted unprecedented levels of support with over 60 partners and sponsors, including employers, trade unions and other influential people and organisations within the construction sector and elsewhere..

In 2019, the BOHS generously offered the AIOH the Breathe Freely documents and website design to develop a similar website for Australian workers and industry. The AIOH wish to acknowledge the excellent contribution of the BOHS.

Breathe Freely Australia

Controlling exposures to prevent occupational lung disease in the construction industry

We have started with the construction industry. And specifically, we're tackling lung disease in construction. Why? Because we have to start somewhere and the facts about this sector are particularly shocking.

Not all the Australian figures are available for the construction industry and the UK numbers provide an indication of the extent of the health impacts. There were 35 fatal injuries to UK construction workers in 2014/15. Each of these is an individual tragedy. But in the same industry and over the same period of time (a year), there were about 5,500 new occupational cancer cases, 3,500 deaths from past exposures to asbestos and 500 deaths from exposure to silica dust alone. That's a considerably bigger tragedy.

At AIOH we understand the impact of occupational ill health in construction. But we also know how important it is to generate better awareness of its causes as well as how to do something about it. So that everyone can *breathe freely*.

Recognise, evaluate, control and **breathe freely**

1. Recognise the hazards and *breathe freely*

Construction workers could be exposed to some, many or all of the following:

- Diesel exhaust fumes and particulate matter
- Silica dust
- Wood and other dusts
- Asbestos
- Welding fumes
- Legionella and other biological agents
- Solvents
- Isocyanates, epoxy and other resin vapours and mists

These aren't the only dusts and chemical hazards you'll find on a construction site (or in any workplace). Lead is another, and there are physical hazards like noise, vibration, heat and light and radiation, and manual handling and other ergonomic issues. But these are just some of the substances which we know cause lung diseases. Serious, debilitating, irreversible, life-limiting and, in some cases fatal, lung diseases. Like lung cancer, pulmonary fibrosis (eg. asbestosis and silicosis), asthma, pulmonary oedema, pneumonia, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) which includes conditions such as chronic bronchitis and emphysema.

2. Evaluate the risks and *breathe freely*

Not every risk to health is a high risk. Low level exposures to some harmful substances may cause only temporary ill effects or none at all. But any exposure, even at the minutest levels, to other substances can lead to debilitating or chronic diseases. Some substances are hazardous only if exposure to them happens over a long time; others cause ill health immediately, or lead to worsening symptoms if exposure continues. Risks can also be reduced or increased depending on the workplace environment, the work tasks involved, the methods of working - all things which can affect exposures.

Many respiratory hazards cannot be seen by the naked eye. And many ill health effects don't appear until many years later. Often, published workplace exposure limits and guidance surrounding known hazards can provide the information you need to assess the health risk. Sometimes though, only specialist exposure monitoring techniques, like air or biological monitoring, can determine the level of risk for particular workers to particular diseases.

There are a multitude of construction trades, all facing a combination of different levels of different health risks, all of the time. It's clear that not everybody on site everywhere understands this. But we do.

3. Control exposure and *breathe freely*

When you understand the health hazards and have evaluated the risks, then you're in a position to effectively control exposures.

This might mean sourcing different products and materials in the first place, changing work methods and habits, segregating work areas, implementing engineering controls like dust extraction tools and ventilation, and introducing PPE.

It should also mean training and communication, supervision, maintenance and testing of controls and ongoing monitoring. A good control method becomes a poor one if it's broken or not used properly, or at all.

The invisible nature of many of the toxic substances that workers breathe in



The long latency of their ill effects



Controls are often frequently ignored



BREATHE FREELY Australia



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Breathe Freely Australia - helping you take control

Occupational hygiene is about recognising, evaluating and controlling risks to health in the workplace.
Occupational hygienists have the knowledge and skills to help you protect your employees.

Let's get going by deciding to treat health like safety.
Sign up to our HI Standard and commit to a contract for health.

Then begin to ***breathe freely.***

Join us and be part of the solution

www.breathefreelyaustralia.org.au