

28 September 2023

Statement from ACTU Assistant Secretary Liam O'Brien:

Dear Media Watch,

The ACTU draws your attention to the Channel Nine TV show 'The Block' and their promotion of engineered stone, a product that has led to thousands of Australian workers suffering from silicosis, an incurable and aggressive lung disease.

We are disappointed to see the show promoting the use of Silestone, an engineered stone brand produced by Spanish company Cosentino, which admitted in court overseas that it negligently concealed the dangers of its product, allegedly resulting in nearly 1,900 workers contracting silicosis. Attached with this letter is a video clip of Episode 28 of The Block's latest season, which aired on September 20, with timestamps approximately 24:29-25:28. In the video, contestants Kristy and Brett are taken to a factory where a company promotes their "low-silica technology" and misrepresent it as safe, with one of the contestants commenting that they were "very impressed." Cosentino's product is praised multiple times throughout the show, to the extent that every contestant uses the engineered stone for their kitchen benchtops.

Engineered stone is not an essential building material and there are many safe alternatives. Dusts generated when working with engineered stone qualitatively differ from natural stone, with experts including the Australian Institute of Occupational Hygienists establishing that even low silica engineered stone represent unmanageable risks during fabrication and thus should be prohibited. In fact, there is no credible evidence of a safe threshold level of exposure.

One of many cases highlighting the risks associated with engineered stone is the tragic story of Kyle Goodwin, who was just 34 years of age when he was diagnosed with Progressive Massive Fibrosis (advanced silicosis) and was given a 5-8 year prognosis. Kyle was a stonemason for only 8 years and worked extensively with Silestone engineered stone and other similar products. Sadly, Kyle is expected to die soon due to his immense exposures to engineered stone products like Silestone.

The exact number of silicosis cases is unknown; however, various state-based screening and research programs indicate it is already at least several hundred. The latest Victorian research found 28% of engineered stone bench top workers had silicosis, while in Queensland, that rate is 25%. Modelling by Curtin University estimates that if we don't act to prevent silicosis, more than 103,000 Australian workers will be diagnosed with the disease due to their current exposure to silica dust at work, and more than 10,000 workers are expected to develop lung cancer.

TV programs such as The Block should be warning consumers that the product they are purchasing has come at the expense of workers' lives, instead of what appears to be a 'cash for comment' approach.

We would appreciate your program investigating this matter further and ascertaining whether The Block will continue to promote this product.

Yours sincerely,
Liam O'Brien
Assistant Secretary