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To: All Branches

Dear Colleagues,

All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Respiratory Health Publishes Inquiry Report Warning UK Government That It Must Act to Prevent the 'next Asbestos' Taking More Lives in the UK:

The All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Respiratory Health has urged the Government to take action to prevent the 'next Asbestos' from taking more lives in the UK with the publication of its report entitled "Silica The Next Asbestos".

The APPG and not-for-profit organisation B&CE's joint report, *Silica – The Next Asbestos*, examines the danger posed by Respirable Crystalline Silica (RCS); the biggest risk to construction workers' health after Asbestos. The inquiry was launched on 9 July 2019 and the Report was published on 4 March 2020.

Around 600,000 UK workers are exposed to RCS each year, which is created when bricks or stone are either fractured, cut or drilled into. This can cause Silicosis, the most common chronic occupational lung disease in the world. In Australia, the recent rise in cases of Silicosis has been described as an 'emerging occupational health epidemic', but awareness and understanding of the risks of RCS exposure remains "low", the report says.

The new report calls on the Government to take a number of crucial steps to address these issues and protect construction workers from exposure to RCS.

The Report recommendations include:

- Halving the workplace exposure limit (WEL) for RCS in the UK from 0.1mg/m³ to 0.05mg/m³ in line with the 2003 recommended exposure standard from the Scientific Committee on Occupation Exposure Limits.
- Developing and implementing a targeted industry awareness campaign for those at risk of developing Silicosis.
- Introducing occupational health services into GP surgeries to allow for occupational histories to be taken where work-related ill health is suspected.
- Introducing new health and safety regulations specifically relating to the control of Respirable Crystalline Silica (RCS), to bring it into line with Asbestos.
- Introducing an NHS screening programme for those exposed to RCS.

Thousands of construction workers are being put at risk by breathing in tiny dust particles when they drill or cut stone, the new report states. Workers are being put at risk of developing Silicosis - a chronic lung disease caused by the inhalation of Silica dust. Silicosis occurs when the body's immune system tries to remove the tiny particles of dust, resulting in swelling and scarring of the lung tissue. The condition usually develops after being exposed to Silica for at least a decade but some are affected sooner. Symptoms include a persistent cough, shortness of breath with weakness and tiredness. There is no cure and treatments aim to relieve symptoms and improve quality of life.

The Inquiry has raised awareness around the risks of Silica dust and given insight into the steps being taken to improve at-work health, especially around the issue of Silica dust. The APPG hope the report will assist the Health and Safety Executive, the Government and the construction industry to shine light on an under-documented issue and protect the construction workforce from preventable injury and illnesses. The aim of this report is to start a long-overdue conversation between Government, Parliament, health bodies and the construction industry about how to tackle Silicosis; an entirely preventable, often fatal, condition.

Retired Stone Mason Gordon Sommerville, 59, from Scotland gave evidence to the inquiry and told how he had to retire due to ill-health. He recalled the almost non-existent levels of industry awareness to the dangers of inhaling dust at the start of his 38-year career. He said that today colleagues teach stoneworkers of the dangers, the HSE runs awareness campaigns and larger companies will supply employees with respiratory protection. But still the danger of dust has not filtered through to most and ignorance is still the major cause of dust diseases he concluded.

In a 2014 report, the HSE stated that Silica is the biggest risk to construction workers after Asbestos and in July 2019, The Australian Department of Public Health launched its 'Taskforce into Silicosis and Other Dust Diseases'.

Yours sincerely



Dave Joyce
National Health, Safety & Environment Officer