

Up to one thousand Queensland coal workers could have black lung, claims union

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Australian Broadcasting Corporation

Broadcast: 03/03/2016

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Unions are predicting 16 per cent of current and retired coal mine workers will have black lung as the Department of Mines admits hundred of thousands of X-rays have not processed.

Transcript

LEIGH SALES, PRESENTER: Next week a Senate inquiry will start into the re-emergence of the sometimes fatal disease black lung among underground coal miners in Queensland. It was thought to have been eradicated from Australian mines decades ago, but the Mining Union is now warning that it could've infected up to 1,000 current and former underground miners. Matt Peacock reports.

GEORGE MCCROHAN, FORMER COAL MINER: Now that's it, see. Now I've got to wait a while. (Panting)

MATT PEACOCK, REPORTER: After 40 years mining coal underground, 75-year-old George McCrohan is dying.

GEORGE MCCROHAN: Yeah. That's it. (Panting) Well I can walk into the kitchen, I can do the washing-up. I can cook breakfast and do that. But as far as anything that's a bit heavier with the hands, arms, I can't do it. And it's just that - it's only for the oxygen, I wouldn't be able to do that.

MATT PEACOCK: He retired fit in 1998, but he's gone downhill rapidly in the past six years.

GEORGE MCCROHAN: Shortness of breath, can't walk far, dry cough and that coughing up of a morning with the small speck of blood through it.

MATT PEACOCK: George believes he may have black lung, a disease caused by long-term exposure to coal dust. If he does, early warning through regular X-rays when he worked could've saved his life. But he says he was never X-rayed.

So, did you get those sort of X-rays and things when you were in the industry?

GEORGE MCCROHAN: No, I never got an X-ray while I was working in the mine. I never had an X-ray.

MATT PEACOCK: Not one?

GEORGE MCCROHAN: Not one.

KEITH STODDART, FORMER COAL MINER: It is getting worse, yeah. Yeah. It's scary.

MATT PEACOCK: So you used to play golf, you used to go swimming?

KEITH STODDART: Yeah, yeah. All of the stuff that's - it was fun. Yeah, so, you know, it's all gone.

MATT PEACOCK: Keith Stoddart also has mined coal for decades and he did have X-rays, but they can't be found.

KEITH STODDART: Where the bloody hell are these X-rays, you know? Get 'em all and get these f**kin' things read. I get just - I don't know. I get crankier and crankier. I try not to even think too much about it 'cause the more I think about it, the crankier I get.

MATT PEACOCK: Only four months ago, he worked here at Anglo American's Grasstree Mine near Middlesbrough in the Bowen Basin. A shortness of breath when we spoke to him before Christmas had him worried.

GEORGE MCCROHAN: I'm concerned about what I've got. What's gonna happen to me - I'm concerned about that. Hopefully I won't get any worse than what I am.

MATT PEACOCK: He has got worse, with now only 50 per cent of his lung function remaining. After several examinations and a biopsy, he's been diagnosed with black lung.

GEORGE MCCROHAN: The last time I'd seen three specialists and they said it was just the smoking and whatnot, but I've finally been confirmed with it.

MATT PEACOCK: Since 1993, all Queensland coal miners must receive pre-employment chest X-rays then another at least once every five years, with copies sent to the Mines Department for review. But by last year, the department admits 150,000 X-rays had still not been filed.

CRAIG WORSLEY, TAYLORS SOLICITORS: They respond by giving us five lines in a letter effectively saying that out of seven X-rays that they should have in their possession, they've only got one, and that's back in 1993!

STEPHEN SMYTH, CFMEU MINING DISTRICT PRESIDENT: It's a mess. You use that as one example on top of the other 150,000 unprocessed records, including X-rays and health assessments, it's a mess and there is no light at the end of the tunnel.

MATT PEACOCK: 7.30 previously revealed that a 1984 survey by the Government identified 75 workers who had or were suspected of having black lung. The Government says their GPs or local hospitals were notified, but the union suspects that the workers themselves weren't.

JASON HILL, CFMEU SAFETY & MINING HEALTH OFFICER: No, I don't think they were told, otherwise we would've known about it. We would've had documents or minutes in our organisation for meetings where this would've been highlighted.

MATT PEACOCK: By 1999, according to a draft Mines Department report leaked to 7.30, "... of the 75 cases identified, none were reported to be currently in the coal industry ...". Nobody now seems to know what happened to them.

JASON HILL: There's been no evidence of any follow-up on those men and what happened with them and if they - were they left to their own devices and - and die a terrible death without any help from the companies that actually exposed them to the hazard?

MATT PEACOCK: The Mining Union is concerned the disease could be widespread.

JASON HILL: What we're projecting is that we're going to have 60 per cent of current and retired coal mine workers with pneumoconiosis.

MATT PEACOCK: Last year, US expert Dr Robert Cohen identified black lung in two workers from Vale's Carborough Downs mine here in the Bowen Basin, one of whom had earlier been given the all-clear. Dr Cohen's since been hired by Vale to read the X-rays of more than 200 of its workers.

ROBERT COHEN, UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS: I think they've taken the bull by the horns on this and really trying to see what they've got. They haven't shrunk away from the problem ...

MATT PEACOCK: Dr Cohen's also part of the state's current review into black lung's re-emergence.

ROBERT COHEN: The biggest problem in Australia is that we don't know and that's unfortunate. We shouldn't not know. We should have surveillance, it should be in place and then we should know whether we have a problem or not.

JASON HILL: In 2002, there's minutes there to say that say we don't didn't have enough specialised people to read the X-rays and that come from the department. What's been done after that? Nothing.

MATT PEACOCK: Currently, 265 doctors have been nominated by Queensland coal companies to supervise health checks for their miners, but there are concerns that local radiologists don't have the expertise to find black lung.

JASON HILL: It's been supposedly eradicated for 30 years, but it hasn't been eradicated at all, it's been hidden, covered up. We haven't got the people qualified to do it.

MATT PEACOCK: It's here at the Department of Mines that they've been responsible for monitoring the health of coal workers for the past 30 years or so, during which time some of the world's richest mining companies have monitored their own dust levels, often exceeding the safety standard and appointed hundreds of company doctors, many of whom clearly don't know how to read an X-ray for coal miner's disease. And meanwhile, coal miners who are sick are left to fend for themselves, some gasping for breath.

GEORGE MCCROHAN: Well nearly all the old contractors that I - here, they're all dead and gone. And they all had that cough, cough, cough.

KEITH STODDART: There must be hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of miners that have been retired and possibly even the ones that are still working. And it's a great job and most miners love it. They want to keep working. They want to be doing it safely.

LEIGH SALES: Matt Peacock with that report.

[Statement from the Queensland Department of Mines](#)

[Statement from Anglo America](#)

[1984 Government survey identifying 75 confirmed or suspected cases of black lung amongst the state's underground coal miners.](#)

[A leaked copy of the 1999 draft Mines Department report](#)

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