

Coal miner's death after silicosis diagnosis a warning on dangerous dust levels

7.30 By Michael Atkin

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PHOTO: Tyrone Buckton and wife Trisha Buckton the day before he died from silicosis. (ABC News: Michael Atkin)

Queensland miner Tyrone Buckton never spent a day underground but last week died after being diagnosed with silicosis.

The lung disease is caused by high levels of exposure to silica dust, which the union says could pose a greater workplace hazard than coal dust.

Mr Buckton worked at the Goonyella Riverside open cut coal mine, which is owned by BHP Billiton and Mitsubishi, for more than 30 years.

He was diagnosed with silicosis last October.

Silica is one of the most common minerals in the earth's crust and can be found in construction materials such as bricks, tiles and concrete.

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7.30 was provided with intimate access to Mr Buckton and his family the day before he died in Rockhampton Hospital.

Mr Buckton, 69, was too unwell to be interviewed and struggled at times to follow the conversation.

He also had emphysema (he smoked for 17 years but quit in 1989) and severe scarring on his lungs, making it almost impossible for him to breathe.

Wife Trisha Buckton said her husband wanted people to see what exposure to silica dust had done to him.

"He wants people to be aware it's a crippling disease, it's disgusting, and it just takes you so quick," Mrs Buckton said.

"It's not the coal dust, he's never spent a day underground. It's the silica dust that got him."

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PHOTO: Tyrone Buckton at work at the mine. (Supplied: Trisha Buckton)

Mr Buckton's specialist, thoracic physician Dr Robert Edwards, is one of Australia's leading experts on dust lung diseases such as silicosis.

He said Mr Buckton's silicosis was severe and caused by his mining career.

"From what he's told me it sounds like it's heavy exposure," he told 7.30.

"He was covered in dust at the end of his shift, he coughed up dust on a regular basis at the end of a shift."

Silica dust 20 times more toxic than coal dust



PHOTO: A conveyor belt at the Goonyella coal mine. (ABC News: Jonathan Hair)

Silicosis is one of the world's oldest occupational diseases.

In 2015, 7.30 revealed exposure to coal dust was making miners terminally ill with pneumoconiosis, also known as black lung.

These were the first black lung cases identified in Queensland in 30 years, resulting in an overhaul of the Department of Natural Resources and Mines and increased scrutiny of dust levels.

Now the mining union, the CFMEU, is warning silica dust could pose a greater workplace hazard than coal dust because it

is 20 times more toxic.

President of CFMEU Queensland Steve Smyth said they were seeing more and more cases of silicosis.

"I think silica dust is a bigger threat, and I say that in a sense in the consequences of people getting silicosis," Mr Smyth said.

"Tyrone is the tip of the iceberg."

Mrs Buckton said her husband was unaware he may have silicosis even after black lung was re-identified.

"We only thought black lung was coal dust," she said.

"We never thought it would be anything he'd have, because he'd been out of the mine since 2004.

"Tyrone wants people to be aware of it, get their x-rays and keep getting themselves checked because you don't have to be working at the mines to have this coming up."

'I feel cheated'



PHOTO: Sam Stefanaras, pictured with wife Sarah, believes his illness is due to exposure to silica (ABC News: Colin Hertzog)

Sam Stefanaras believes exposure to silica dust during his six years in the coal industry has also left him with the crippling disease.

The 47-year-old from northern New South Wales has scarring on his lungs and an auto-immune disease known as scleroderma, which causes inflammation of his joints and tightening of his skin, especially around his hands.

Mr Stefanaras needs his wife Sarah's help for everyday tasks, like getting dressed.

"My hands are like rock, they're very swollen. [It's] very hard to grab small, tiny things," he told 7.30.

It is most severe when he is cold.

"My hands, they go purple ... the smaller capillaries are dead so the blood can't circulate through the hand," he said.

"It's very painful."



PHOTO: Sam Stefanaras after working a shift at the coal mine. (Supplied: Sam Stefanaras)

Until 2016, Mr Stefanaras was working as a contractor at two underground coal mines, Moranbah North and Grosvenor, both owned by the multinational Anglo American.

He is now suing Anglo American for damages, alleging they caused his conditions by exposing him to unsafe levels of silica dust, leaving him unable to work in the mining industry.

Roger Singh from Shine Lawyers is representing Sam Stefanaras.

He said the claim alleges Anglo American failed to provide him with a safe working environment.

"The fact of the matter is Sam was working there, they owed him a duty of care, they were derelict in their duty and they've now caused him to suffer a horrific disease which is going to diminish his quality of life," he said.

Mr Stefanaras says his medical experts have told him his conditions may kill him.

"I feel cheated," he said.

"We turn up to work and we do the right thing to work towards our future, but what point is that if you're not going to have one, because you're going to get sick?"

In a statement, Anglo American said it could not comment while its investigation into Mr Stefanaras' claim was still underway.

"Anglo American takes its obligations to provide a safe work environment for coal-mine workers very seriously," it said.

"We have a number of measures designed to manage and monitor dust levels at our operations."

Last year Queensland's Mining Minister Anthony Lynham took the rare step of naming and shaming Anglo American for failing to meet its legal dust monitoring obligations at their Moranbah North and Grosvenor mines.

"In my view, any failure to meet their safety and health obligation is not acceptable," Dr Lynham told the parliament.

"I have voiced my concerns to the Mines Inspectorate and have been assured that decisive action is underway."

Mining companies 'see the regulator as a joke'



PHOTO: Tyrone and Trisha Buckton when they were young (Supplied: Trisha Buckton)

Mr Buckton died last Thursday night, just days before his 50th wedding anniversary.

His wife wants his death to be the catalyst for urgent change.

She is calling for the legal levels of silica dust in Queensland's mines to be immediately halved to 0.05mg/m³ in line with the standard imposed in the United States.

"Make it safe for everybody, so everybody, when they've finished work, they come home and they're not bringing a problem with them," she said.

The halving of silica dust levels was recommended last year by a Queensland joint parliamentary committee established after the re-emergence of black lung.

CFMEU's Mr Smyth said he has discussed the potential change with the mining minister, but his membership was growing increasingly impatient waiting for action.

"Workers have had enough, we've had enough and they can do the right thing by workers and simply as a start reduce these levels, have enforcement and have real action," Mr Smyth said.



PHOTO: Goonyella Riverside open cut mine, located near Moranbah. (ABC News: Jonathan Hair)

New figures obtained by 7.30 show Queensland mines continue to exceed the legal level of silica dust.

Last year mines breached the limit 56 times, and in the first quarter of this year mines were in breach another 18 times.

Mr Smyth from the CFMEU said that was unacceptable.

He believes it is further evidence the Palaszczuk Government needs to significantly increase the proportion of unannounced inspections at mines.

Currently just 10 per cent of inspections are unannounced.

"[The mining companies] see the regulator as a joke, they really do, because the regulator rings them and tells them 'we're coming to the mine site'," Mr Smyth told 7.30.

"Real action needs to happen."

In a statement, Queensland Mining Minister Anthony Lynham said the introduction of new laws in 2017 had been effective in reducing the average silica dust levels.

He also said an individual exceedances did not itself mean non-compliance.

"A single exceedance refers to a personal monitoring sample at a single point in time and is a signal to the mine and the regulator that attention is required to ensure that average concentrations within the mine are at acceptable levels," Dr Lynham said.

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BHP Billiton, Anglo American, Mining Minister Anthony Lynham and the Queensland Resources Council declined to be interviewed by 7.30.

In a statement, BHP said it had worked directly with Mr Buckton and his family in recent months to assist with his care.

A lump sum settlement of Mr Buckton's injury claim for coal mine dust-induced lung disease was also paid by BHP in early May.

BHP declined to answer questions about how many other current and former workers at the Goonyella Riverside mine have been diagnosed with silicosis or other silica and coal dust-related conditions.

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In a statement, the Department of Natural Resources and Mines said over the last eight years it had issued more than 50 directives to 12 coal mines in relation to respirable dust.

On three occasions the directive required the suspension of mining operations.

It said the proportion of samples exceeding the regulated limit has fallen to less than 1 per cent of those tested compared with 9 per cent in 2016.

There have been 71 reported cases of mine dust lung diseases reported in Queensland since 1984, including 27 cases of coal workers' pneumoconiosis, otherwise known as black lung, and nine cases of silicosis.

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Topics: coal, diseases-and-disorders, health, respiratory-diseases, australia, qld, nsw

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