

# Concerns for Kiwi stonemasons after accelerated silicosis rise in Australian benchtop craftsmen

Tommy Livingston 10:18, Jun 19 2019



JASON DORDAY/STUFF

Dr Alexandra Muthu is leading the charge to raise awareness about accelerated silicosis

Hundreds of Kiwi stonemasons are likely affected by an incurable and sometimes fatal lung disease from cutting stone bench tops - but don't yet know it.

The dire warning comes from leading occupational physician Dr Alexandra Muthu who is working alongside government to prepare for what she says is a disease "more significant" than asbestos.



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Stone benchtops are a popular fixture, but those that make them could be at risk of advanced silicosis.

The rise of the disease is being blamed on the demand for fashionable stone bench tops.

The risks associated with cutting natural stone have been known for sometime, but the dangers of cutting engineered stone only realised when more than 170 young stonemasons in Australia were diagnosed with accelerated silicosis in the last year.

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The disease is caused by breathing particles of crystalline silica over a period of years, irreversibly damaging a person's lungs. There have been a number of deaths as a result of the disease in Australia, with many others left in need of a lung transplant to survive.

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Based on the high numbers in Australia, Muthu anticipates there are 150-250 stonemasons who currently have accelerated silicosis in New Zealand.

There is yet to be anyone diagnosed but that was because symptoms were not obvious until the late stages, Muthu said.

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"We know there are very young workers in their 20s, 30s and early 40s who think they are well. We are going to have to find them and tell them they have an incredibly significant lung disease, that will impact on their function and shorten their life."

Work was being done by a newly formed taskforce chaired by Muthu with WorkSafe, ACC and the Ministry of Health formulating a plan so those affected could be properly diagnosed.

[WorkSafe sent out a safety alert](#) last month warning industry professionals about the risks.

The Minister of Health had also been briefed on the issue, and the government asked to support a co-ordinated national case-finding response.

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The disease was more dangerous than asbestos due to the short amount of time required for it to develop.

Despite the severity of the disease, Muthu said it was important people didn't panic.

"Nobody has to rush to their GP or ED. It is important we do this in a coordinated way so the correct experts are involved and that we get the correct diagnoses."

She anticipated some in the industry would not take her warning seriously: "There is nothing to indicate we are different from Australia."

Dr Graeme Edwards, who helped discover the problem in Australia, is hoping the New Zealand government will act quickly to try and minimise those at risk here.

"It is a very important issue ... We have not seen a thing with this sort of magnitude in the past," he said.