

Deadly Daily Grind

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Leisa Scott



They were young, fit and loved their jobs – but now hundreds of Australian stonemasons face a death sentence

It's the kitchen bench you notice as soon as you walk in to Josh Hunt's home. Solid, durable, with top-shelf 40mm edging, it was once a source of pride, cut and installed by Hunt after he was given the engineered stone by his employer as a bonus for hard work.

It's now a constant reminder that working with this stone has turned his old life to dust.

"I put everything into that company and then, nothing," says the 28-year-old former stonemason at his Caboolture home. "I worked away from my family, I missed so much. For what? To lose it all."

Hunt now spends most days at home, unable to work in his trade because he has silicosis, a disease that irreversibly scars and stiffens the lungs, caused by inhaling the silica dust that comes off stone when it's being cut. It can be fatal. His prognosis is unclear but his lung capacity has fallen significantly in the past year. He's depressed and suffers anxiety.

"I'm just empty inside," he says.

He used to spend up to 15 hours a day at work and loved it. "I had drive," he says. He loved grinding and shaping a slab of stone into a stylish centrepiece, the mateship at the workshop, the way his dedication took him from a 15-year-old apprentice to a troubleshooting manager who flew to interstate branches of the Gold Coast-based company. "I felt good, I felt like I was needed and I was moving forward."

He wasn't so keen on the superfine dust – respirable crystalline silica – that floated about the workshop, getting up his nose and in his mouth, and caking his clothes. But that, he believed, was part of the job.

It shouldn't have been. For centuries it's been known that the dust from quartz contained in granite, marble and other stones can cause silicosis. Then, in the early 2000s, engineered, or artificial stone, came along. It looks good and is cheaper than the natural stuff – and contains a lot more silica. Granite has about 35 per cent silica; engineered stone up to 95 per cent. And yet, around Australia, stonemasons such as Hunt were lucky if they were provided pretty-much-useless paper masks to keep them safe.

Just who's to blame is going to be fought out in the courts for decades as the roles of the companies that manufacture and supply the stone, the employers of stonemasons who work it, and the government sectors that regulate it are contested. Meanwhile, the numbers of sufferers are growing. The first Australian case linked to engineered stone was a 52-year-old man diagnosed in 2015. The figure is now at more than 300, the bulk from Queensland which has led the way in screening. More will come. And they're mostly men in their 20s and 30s.

Men such as Hunt, who has three girls, Kaitlyn, 9, Hayleigh, 6, and Makayla, 4. Makayla arrives home with mum, Kelly, 30, as we sit with Hunt's father, Tim, at the kitchen bench talking about how the diagnosis in October 2018 has changed Hunt.

"He's not the same person," says Kelly, fighting back tears. She walks away, leaving Tim to continue. "His temperament has changed, a bit short-fused," says Tim. "You can see his mind working overtime."

Says Hunt: "I won't lie, I get real bad anxiety. I won't answer my phone for days, to dad, to mum, anyone. And Kelly's got to put up with me. It's hard on her." He started seeing a psychiatrist about eight months after diagnosis, after spending days in bed. He believes he should have been offered mental health help a lot earlier.

Hunt used to earn more than \$100,000; now he's on WorkCover. That's likely to be cut off before the end of the year. He's launched legal action against his employer. All 10 of the people he started working with have silicosis and by the time he left, 28 staff had been diagnosed.

He knows fellow silicosis sufferer, Shane Parata, the brother of Anthony White, the Gold Coast man who was the first Australian to die

of the advanced form of silicosis, progressive massive fibrosis.



It upsets Hunt that his former employers have not been in contact.

"They pretty much wiped their hands of any of us who were diagnosed. As soon as they knew we weren't coming back, that was it. Thirteen years and then nothing."

His anxiety is exacerbated by the constriction of his employment options. He's not permitted – by WorkCover and his specialist – to find work in the construction industry, where silica dust, even at small levels, could be dangerous to his health. Mowing is out, because of the risk of aggravating his lungs; the cleaning industry, too.

Hunt is showing symptoms now; he gets breathless walking the kids 15 minutes to school. He tries not to think about it. What plays on his mind more acutely is losing his identity, his sense of purpose.

"How do you start again? That affects me the most; losing everything I worked for."

Silica dust drifting constantly in the air of workshops, propelled into workers' faces by fans used to keep them cool in summer. Workers cutting stone dry, without water to suppress the dust. No masks. Men resorting to wrapping a rag around their faces. No extractor fans. Dust left to settle on floors and walls, only to be whipped up the next day.

These stories are common among the men who prepare benches for dream kitchens. "You'd go home like a snowman," says Lea Robson, 40, from Morayfield, who has silicosis after working for three companies in the industry for more than 10 years.

Right now, 164 Queensland stonemasons have been diagnosed with silicosis, also known as simple silicosis where nodules are detected on the lung. Some will not yet experience symptoms: shortness of breath, a cough, chest pains. Another 28 have progressive massive fibrosis, or complicated silicosis, where the nodules coalesce to become masses, leading to cardiorespiratory failure and death. Ten more have different respiratory conditions.

That's roughly one-fifth of Queensland's stonemasons with a lung illness. The State Government has tested 1026 men, with another 20 yet to be tested, under a free screening program. It was launched following a September 2018 crackdown on "disturbing and unsafe work practices" spearheaded by a "reinforced" ban on uncontrolled dry cutting. There are well in excess of 10,000 stonemasons nationally, with Victoria and NSW now conducting similar tests.

It's not just fabricating workshops that cause concern; when workers go to homes and offices to install benches they often grind them to fit, exposing themselves – and those working nearby – to silica dust. Completed benches are safe.

The alarm was sounded in Queensland during the 2016 inquiry into the return of another workers' disease – black lung. More and more, the inquiry heard evidence of a spike in silicosis diagnoses. Its terms of reference were broadened to investigate, and engineered stone emerged as a serious issue.

Like black lung, silicosis had been considered a largely historical disease, with remaining sufferers believed to have contracted it in the mining, construction and demolition industries in the '60s and '70s. Improved work practices had seen it largely disappear. Most cases of fibrosis on the lungs occurred slowly, 10 to 30 years after exposure, defined as chronic silicosis.



MENTAL STRAIN:

Lea Robson, 40, who has suffered depression since his diagnosis; with daughters Mia-Lane, 13, and Paige, 20, and wife Amy, 40. **Pictures:** Mark Cranitch

But engineered stone is different. Nicole Goh, a respiratory physician and chair of the Australian Rare Lung Disease Committee, says its high silica level means most workers diagnosed have accelerated silicosis; the lung is scarred more rapidly, within about 10 years of exposure. (There is also acute silicosis, which develops within weeks after very heavy exposure and is rare.)

Can patients live with accelerated silicosis without it becoming progressive massive fibrosis? Goh's answer is sobering. "We don't know," she says. "Because there is not enough information. This is a relatively new disease and we don't have enough longitudinal data. We're just diagnosing patients now so we have no idea what's going to happen in the next five to 10 years."

Doctors do know that once you have silicosis it does not go away and there is no treatment, apart from a double lung transplant. Research is under way into the effectiveness of a lung lavage for silicosis, where lungs are "washed out".

What's also understood is that continued exposure to silica dust can further disease progression. Which is why once diagnosed, workers should not stay in the industry.

But when that's your skill base, source of pride and income, it's a lot to give up.

Judith Thomson, the social worker with the Brisbane-based Silicosis Support Network, says a number of its members know men who are dodging screening because they figure if they've got it already, they'd rather keep working. "They see their mates who have been diagnosed and aren't working, with very few options," she says.

People like Lea Robson, who after years in various manual jobs had become a stonemason, earning \$60,000 a year, "the best money I ever had". He's been out of work since he was diagnosed in December 2018.

His doctor broke the news on the phone when he was at his work Christmas party. "Everyone's getting drunk and rowdy and I took the call and the doc just said, 'Really sorry but you're not going to be able to go back to work next year'," recalls Robson. "I remember my guts sort of dropping, felt my heart was in me throat."

He's on WorkCover and seeking damages from all three employers, some of which, he says, had better work practices than others. Towards the end of his employment, he'd bought his own fitted respiratory mask because "I was sick of having the s--- up my nose or my throat".

He's been offered some plastering work but WorkCover has ruled that out and the mowing he used to do. WorkCover has paid for him to get his tickets in excavator, bobcat and loader operating but no jobs have come of it. He's depressed and only recently started to get counselling.

He drinks too much. As soon as his wife, Amy, and daughters, Paige, 20, and Mia-Lane, 13, leave the house, he starts drinking. "I tried to put a halt to it, grab the dogs and go for a long walk. Worked for a bit. Then it turned into me and the dogs going for a walk – to the bottle-o and back."

He gets "really angry and snappy at anything". He's withdrawn from the family, spending a lot of time in the garage. "I didn't want to bring the mood down. Then Amy took it that I didn't want to be with them. The actual truth was I didn't want to be upsetting them, start arguments."

He suffers shortness of breath when he exerts himself but otherwise feels OK physically. "No one will tell me how long I've got, if it's going to get worse. They don't know. No one knows. I sit here all depressed, worrying about it. I could go another 10 years, I could go 20. But f--k, it could take me out next year or the year after. Just don't know."

Thomson has heard many similar stories since the network was established in December last year. It's an offshoot of the Asbestos Disease Support Society which was being inundated by silicosis sufferers searching for help. Most people with asbestosis are older, their issues different. The younger sufferers of what has been dubbed this generation's asbestosis face a lack of support, services, clarity and information.

"It's difficult with this cohort because they're younger and there is a tendency if they get a diagnosis to engage in risky behaviours," says Thomson. "We're looking at mental health issues like depression, anxiety, relationship breakdowns."

She says a lot of men leave their specialist with a diagnosis but no mental health support. She's written to specialists and WorkCover to let them know of the network. A patient's information kit is being prepared. Support meetings are being held.

The lack of clarity about what a diagnosis means in terms of physical decline and lifespan means there's a tendency to catastrophise. "It's OK for specialists to say, 'We don't know', but that has to be supplemented with really strong support and bridge the gap of knowledge with real information and put strategies in place to help the patient and the loved ones," says Thomson. "If we can get to them early maybe we can reduce the severity of a lot of the mental health issues."

"The saddest part is they feel that not only have they lost their job, they've lost their place in society. They don't know what to do and they spiral. There's a lot of fear and anger. This is the beginning of a long story."

Suppliers of engineered stone say it is 100 per cent safe – if cut safely. And that, they argue, is not their job but that of fabrication workshops and installers.

Since the Queensland cases of silicosis emerged in 2018, the four leading manufacturers/suppliers of engineered stone – Caesarstone Australia, Quantum Quartz, Smartstone Australia and Stone Ambassador – formed a lobby group, the Australian Engineered Stone Advisory Group. The companies account for about 77 per cent of artificial stone sold in Australia, importing it from Israel, Vietnam and elsewhere.

Had AESAG members voiced concerns to any customers about how they were fabricating the product? "We do not control fabricators' worksites," says a spokesman. He reiterated AESAG's key argument that comprehensive guidelines on the safe handling of the product were supplied.

Not so, says Nick Hart, a lawyer with Slater and Gordon. "They were producing a product that had very high concentration levels of crystalline silica and they just failed to warn." Warnings have improved in recent years but remain inadequate, he says. The law firm is investigating a class action against manufacturers.

Roger Singh, the national practice leader for dust diseases with Shine Lawyers, is not a supporter of a class action but he and another lawyer in a similar role, Jonathan Walsh of Maurice Blackburn, agree manufacturers bear some blame. All

three lawyers are acting for scores of men with silicosis and Walsh says many clients "never saw a warning label or information sheet about how to adequately deal with it".

But it's clear, they say, that employers – those who put the men in dust-filled workshops or sent them out to homes to dry cut the stone to fit – failed to protect their workers. "They have been derelict in their duty of care to employees and in safeguarding their workers and as a consequence of that it is a national crisis," says Singh.

Multi-millions of dollars' worth of payouts, not just in workers' compensation but damages, have already been made, generally through government insurers such as WorkCover. "We're talking about pain and suffering in young men, diminished life expectancy, earning capacity extinguished," says Singh. He says clients are not only suffering silicosis. A number have silica exposure-related auto-immune diseases such as rheumatoid arthritis, Sjogren's syndrome, which attacks moisture-producing glands, and scleroderma, which "impacts the heart, the lungs, the kidneys, the bowel". Silica dust also causes lung cancer. Lawyers say government regulators also let workers down by failing to check compliance with workplace health and safety laws around air monitoring and protective equipment.

Queensland's Industrial Relations Minister Grace Grace did not respond directly to whether she accepted Worksafe Queensland failed to oversee work practices, saying the state was leading the nation in responding.

The figures suggest checks were not rigorous. In the five years to Queensland's September 2018 crackdown, 114 contraventions of workplace safety were detected. And about a quarter of those came in the first phase of an industrywide audit of 148 stone benchtop workplaces between October 2017 and December 2018 – after the alarm was sounded about silicosis.

In those 14 months, 598 failures were revealed, including uncontrolled dry cutting, the lack of proper respiratory equipment, inadequate cleaning practices and an almost blanket failure to provide personal dust exposure monitoring or health monitoring. Fines totalling \$58,000 were issued. Some companies are still being investigated, with possible fines of up to \$600,000 for company officers.

Twelve months after Grace "reinforced" that dry cutting was prohibited, Queensland produced Australia's first industry code of practice, setting minimum and enforceable standards. It came into effect on October 31 last year. Workshops are required to use enclosed water suppression tools and exhaust

systems, install barriers between work stations, and provide correctly fitted respiratory masks with filters and vacuum units to decontaminate clothes. From May, inspectors will re-audit workplaces to check compliance.

Singh is not convinced that's enough. He's proposed all states and territories legislate for fabricators to need a licence, issued annually. "To avoid complacency," he says. "In some ways, a code of practice is a toothless tiger."



HOPES DASHED:

Anthony White's mother Di White; White, 36, who died last year from silicosis; **Pictures:** Luke Marsden, Mark Cranitch

AESAG is trying to assert control, seeking accreditation by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission to run a standards program that fabricators would need to sign up to. Its application was widely rejected by stakeholders and was withdrawn in February. It's being revised. A federal review by the National Dust Disease Taskforce into ways to stem the spike of silicosis cases is under way, due to report by year-end. Interim recommendations made late last year noted there is "growing support" for the prohibition of engineered stone with very high levels of silica. The Australian Council of Trade Unions wants to go further; it wants engineered stone banned.

Safe Work Australia has cut the amount of silica dust allowed in the workplace by half – from 0.1 mg per cubic metre over eight hours to 0.05 per cubic metre. It will apply in Queensland by July 1, 2020. Queensland's code requires businesses to conduct air monitoring regularly. Policing will be key.

Grace says Queensland acted decisively and recent checks – which will continue – have shown an improvement in practices.

“Worker health and safety is of paramount importance,” she says.

It’s about time, says Gold Coast nurse and mother, Di White, 55. Because it’s too late for her sons, Anthony White and Shane Parata.

For the final six months of

Anthony’s life, most days were spent in his bedroom, breathing raggedly, hooked up to a CPAP machine. “He lost weight, couldn’t walk a great deal,” says Di, at the Gold Coast home where she cared for him. Some days, he was in an intensive care unit in an induced coma.

On good days, he’d visit the nearby Treetops Tavern to play the pokies. He was there the night he died, aged 36, on March 9 last year. “He passed out in the bathroom and management knocked the door down and tried to save him.” The police came to tell her. “I honestly thought I was going to die right then. Just the weight.”

The first sign of the progressive massive fibrosis that killed him was a nagging cough, misdiagnosed as a chest infection about a month before his November 2017 diagnosis. His brother, Shane Parata, 35, was diagnosed with silicosis a couple of months before Anthony died. He’s no longer working, feels his breathing has declined and suffers depression. He harbours guilt for getting Anthony into stonemasonry about 12 years ago. “But Ant never blamed Shane,” says Di.

“Who do you blame? The suppliers, the business, the government? I think it’s a combination and I think the (federal) government needs to step up. This needs to be Australia-wide.” The fact the national taskforce won’t return findings until the end of this year frustrates her. “It’s too long, it should have been done already.”

She wants engineered stone banned.

“This is not just about Queensland, this is happening everywhere. I’m talking to a young man in WA who’s now been diagnosed, he’s fighting to get somebody to believe it’s a real problem. These are young men, with families. It’s wrong.” She wipes away tears. She’s had more than her share of tragedy: her partner, Chris Parata, 63, also died last year, eight months after Anthony, and at the start of that year, their daughter, Tahlee, 29, lost a baby 34 weeks into her pregnancy. Di’s talking now to keep the silicosis issue in the public eye. Just as Anthony did from

July 2018, before the Queensland Government went public about the spike in silicosis cases. "He was very humble, more the type to sit in the background. I was really proud when he spoke out about this. I could see the anger and passion and the fight that was there in him."

She's determined to stay optimistic for Shane and clings to fond memories of "Ant".

Like when they went to a gold class cinema for her birthday in January last year. They giggled over their difficulty putting the seat back. They ordered some sliders. They saw Aquaman.

"More his type of movie than mine," she jokes. "He loved superhero movies." Including Marvel's Ant-Man.

"We put 'Ant-Man Forever' on his coffin. I call him my Superhero. For speaking up."