Dear Ministers Hunt, Grace and Miles,

As President of Workplace Health Without Borders (WHWB) (International), and representing the international WHWB Board, I am writing to inform you that WHWB (International) fully endorses and supports the recommendations of the Australasian Faculty of Occupational and Environmental Medicine (AFOEM) and the Thoracic Society of Australia and New Zealand (TSANZ), with regard to workers in Australian stone industries, who are occupationally exposed to silica-containing dust.

Imagine a world where workers do not get sick because of their work.
Silicosis is an aggressive, debilitating and potentially fatal respiratory disease which develops in workers exposed to silica-containing dust, in a wide variety of industries. Silicosis has no cure, but importantly, it is preventable by following well-established, strict and appropriate work practices.

It is our opinion that not following the proposed recommendations to reduce and ultimately eliminate exposure to silica-containing dust will have serious ramifications for both industry and the Government, due to the unprecedented level of negative health impacts as reported in the recent RACP media release¹.

Dr Graeme Edwards – Occupational Physician and Dr Clare Wood – Occupational Physician and (WHWB International) Board Member, have alerted WHWB (International) about this serious public health issue, and we are currently sharing this information with WHWB members internationally.

WHWB supports AFOEM and TSANZ in their call for;

(1) A national respiratory health surveillance program, with standardised methods of data collection; and

(2) A national occupationally acquired respiratory disease registry for notification of cases.

and especially in their recommendation to immediately ensure silica dust levels are maintained at a safe level at all benchtop fabrication workplaces, in line with legislative requirements, through the following recommendations for the government:

• An urgent review of the dust control measures used in the industry, including monitoring of dust levels
• Comprehensive enforcement of hazardous substances regulations related to silica dust exposure

• Enforcement of an immediate prohibition on dry cutting techniques

• Safe Work Australia to immediately reduce the Time Weighted Average Workplace Exposure Standard (TWA WES) in Australia to 0.05mg/m3

• Support urgent research to consider the even lower standard of 0.025mg/m3 if supported by the evidence - this level is currently recommended by the American Council of Government Industrial Hygienists (ACGIH) and some Australian hygienists

WHWB also supports the advice from AFOEM and TSANZ for medical practitioners who are treating workers who may have been occupationally exposed to silica-containing dust due to working in the artificial stone industry.

We recommend that all medical practitioners seeing workers from stone industries:

• Ask about respiratory symptoms, bearing in mind that in the early stages of the condition the patient will be asymptomatic.

• Assess the patient using chest x-ray (with ILO classification) and full lung function testing including diffusion capacity DLCO. (Spirometry performed in a non-laboratory setting is associated with a significant false negative rate and may falsely reassure both doctor and patient).

• Strongly consider a high-resolution CT chest (non-contrast), if the patient has worked in this industry for over three years.

• Refer to an occupational physician or respiratory physician for further assessment, if there are any concerns.

Workplace Health Without Borders (WHWB) were founded in Toronto, Canada, in the spring of 2011, as a not-for-profit organization, to help address occupational health and hygiene issues in the developing world. We now have well-established branches in the US and UK, and are currently forming a branch in Australia. Our global membership number is greater than 500 with more than 800 are on our distribution list.
We will continue to monitor the work being done in Queensland specifically, and in Australia more broadly, and support AFOEM and TSANZ in their work.

Should you wish to discuss this further, please contact Dr Clare Wood, Board Member for WHWB (International) based in Brisbane, Australia at drclarewood@gmail.com

Yours Sincerely,
Dr. Kevin Hedges, President: Workplace Health Without Borders (International)

About Workplace Health Without Borders:

Vision
A world in which workers, their families, and communities do not get ill because of their work.

Mission
To prevent work-related disease and injury around the world through shared expertise, knowledge and skills.

To learn more about our strategy: The WHWB International Strategic Framework has just been revised and was published on 28 February 2018; please see the URL: http://www.whwb.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Strategic-Framework-WHWB-Intl.pdf