

Willis Bros' answers to 7.30's questions

7.30 has interviewed former stonemason Jack Gray who has been diagnosed with silicosis including progressive massive fibrosis. Mr Gray said he worked at Willis Bros. for 13 years first on the Gold Coast then in Melbourne. Does Willis Brothers accept his condition is related to his employment with Willis Bros?

We deeply regret the news that our former workmate Jack Gray has been diagnosed with this condition. We only became aware of his diagnosis when we were contacted by Mr Gray's lawyers this week.

We are cooperating with the authorities' investigations into the industry generally, and into any diagnoses of employees who have worked at Willis Bros at any point during their careers.

We are aware that Mr Gray has worked for other employers in the industry and as an independent contractor operating his own business for a number of years.

At this stage we believe it is too early to form any conclusions and we are awaiting the outcomes of any investigation of the relevant authorities.

To the best of our knowledge we have complied with relevant regulations as they have applied over the years.

Mr Gray said the workplace conditions in both factories were dusty, stonemasons engaged in the practice known as dry cutting, wearing a mask was not enforced and there was poor ventilation. What is your response?

To the best of our knowledge we have complied with relevant regulations as they applied at the time. The safety and wellbeing of our people has always been the top priority for Willis Bros and we have acted to address any risks as they have become known and understood in the industry.

In many situations, we have implemented safeguards before they were required under regulations.

Mr Gray said he was aware 27 people who had worked for Willis Bros. have been diagnosed with silicosis. What is your response?

Willis Bros has been operating for more than 20 years. We now have more than 160 employees in three states. The owners of Willis Bros are stonemasons who have spent their entire careers in this industry and worked alongside their employees on the workshop floor.

We do have confirmed diagnoses of silicosis amongst our Queensland workers. At present we also have a number of current employees in Queensland who are off work at the direction of WorkCover and local physicians while their cases are further investigated.

We are, of course, cooperating with these investigations and providing support to our employees.

We have undertaken CT scans of our employees who have had three or more years in our industry, as recommended by the Royal Australian College of Physicians (RACP).

Our recent experience with the required health monitoring has shown quite a number of our employees who are currently on WorkCover were cleared on their x-ray but, under the recommendations from RACP, were sent for a CT scan by Willis Bros and from this a diagnosis has been made.

We are encouraging all new Willis Bros employees to undergo a CT scan, which is particularly important for the employees' peace of mind.

Mr Gray's lawyer Roger Singh from Shine Lawyers has told 7.30 that Willis Bros. has failed in its obligation to provide him with a safe workplace. What is your response?

Please see earlier responses.

As a company what has your response been to the identification of silicosis amongst your current and former workforce?

We are confident that we have met or exceeded our regulatory requirements. Willis Bros has invested heavily into leading edge machinery over the past two years which has greatly reduced manual cutting and handling in our workshops.

In response to the recent issues arising in relation to silicosis and the alerts issued by Queensland authorities, we have:

- contacted our former employees, most of whom have been in the industry for many years and worked for a number of employers. Our concern was for them to have all the information that we have learned about diagnosis and screening. We have advised them to have CT scans, not to rely on x-rays;
- updated and enhanced our employee briefings, inductions and information packs to further emphasise the importance of employees understanding and complying with safety standards;
- implemented a voluntary program through which our administration staff can have CT scan screenings.

The thing that most greatly concerns Willis Bros about the industry at present is that we have found that many applicants for positions at Willis Bros have not been adequately screened while in their former employment. We recommend that all employers follow the recommendations of the Royal Australian College of Physicians (RACP) and have their employees undergo CT scans to establish their health status so, at the very least, they can get peace of mind.

What changes does Willis Bros. believe are required to ensure the long-term viability of the engineered stone industry?

Willis Bros employs tradespeople who are skilled at working with stone of all kinds – natural and engineered. We have no affiliation with any particular product as we practise our craft. Our long-term concern is the health of stonemasons, not the viability of a particular product.

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