

MEDIA RELEASE

Occupational skin diseases found to cost over \$33 million annually

16 March 2012

Safe Work Australia Chair, Mr Tom Phillips AM, today announced the release of two research reports on occupational skin disease – the second most common work-related disease presented to general practitioners in Australia.

Mr Phillips said that skin exposure to chemicals and the causes and occurrence of occupational skin disease are serious workplace health issues that have a large economic impact on the Australian economy each year.

The report *Occupational Contact Dermatitis: A review of 18 years of data from an occupational dermatology clinic in Australia* found that 75 per cent of patients referred to the dermatology clinic had been diagnosed with occupational contact dermatitis.

“At a total economic cost of over \$33 million dollars annually, occupational contact dermatitis is a preventable disease if the proper work health and safety systems are in place,” said Mr Phillips.

Workers most at risk of being diagnosed with occupational skin disease are those exposed to chemicals or wet work in their day to day jobs. These include tradespersons, labourers, healthcare workers, hair and beauty workers and food handlers.

The main industries impacted by occupational skin disease are health and community services, accommodation, cafes and restaurants, construction, agriculture, forestry and fishing.

“Some of these industries have been identified as priority areas for chemical and hazard exposure prevention under the new work health and safety strategy that is due to be released in the second half of 2012,” said Mr Phillips.

Wet work, detergents, disinfectants, solvents, bases and alkalis, fuels, rubber accelerators and potassium dichromate in leather and cement are thought to be some of the main causes of occupational skin diseases.

The report *National Hazard Exposure Worker Surveillance: Chemical exposure and the provision of chemical exposure control measures in Australian workplaces* found that 37 percent of the workers surveyed had skin contact with chemicals in the workplace.

Mr Phillips said that it is concerning that the report found that smaller workplaces were less likely than large workplaces to provide controls for dermal chemical exposure.

“Of the workers who reported exposure to chemicals, only 61 per cent said they had received chemical safety training.”

“This is a clear message that work health and safety training needs to be integrated in every workplace in Australia no matter how big or small and include how to properly handle chemicals and hazardous substances,” said Mr Phillips.

The two reports released today, the recently published report *National Hazard Exposure Worker Surveillance: Exposure of hands and arms to wet work and the provision of wet work control measures in Australian workplaces* and a comparative summary of all three reports can be found at www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au

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