

## Media Release

### Chiefs of Staff, News Directors

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## Australian coal dust exposure controls in need of overhaul

A string of recently reported cases of ‘black lung’ or coal workers’ pneumoconiosis (CWP) in Australia has led to a call for changes to national coal dust exposure control and screening standards.

University of Tasmania Associate Professor Graeme Zosky, from the School of Medicine in the Faculty of Health, is leading a national team of researchers whose paper, ‘Coal workers’ pneumoconiosis: An Australian perspective’, was published today in the *Medical Journal of Australia*.

The paper, which looks at the issue of CWP in Australia, its exposure controls and screening, points to six recent confirmed cases of the disease in Queensland between May 2015 and 2016 as a cause for concern and an indicator of a possible resurgence of the disease.

CWP is an untreatable but preventable lung disease arising from chronic inhalation of coal dust.

Associate Professor Zosky said while many people considered CWP a disease of the past, recent cases in Queensland showed much more needed to be done to eliminate the disease, which was responsible for 25,000 deaths globally as recently as 2013.

“Most cases of CWP occur in the setting of poor occupational hygiene and dust control,” he said.

“Recent reports of CWP in Australia are highly concerning and point to a potential decline in exposure control in Australian mines or a failure of the screening process, or both.”

According to the paper, current Australian coal dust exposure limits vary between states and show considerable variations of monitoring protocols between sites.

Australia's standards are also far less stringent than international standards.

The paper makes several recommendations to address the resurgence of CWP including the standardisation of coal dust exposure limits in line with more stringent international regulations; implementation of a national screening program for at-risk workers; development of appropriate training materials to assist general practitioners in identifying pneumoconiosis; and a system of mandatory reporting of CWP to a centralised occupational lung disease register.

Associate Professor Zosky said while the six confirmed cases of the disease in Queensland between May 2015 and 2016 were now the subject of a Senate inquiry, there was also a need for more independent research into Australian standards and their effectiveness.

One of the challenges in monitoring and screening CWP was its latency period, which could be more than 10 years after exposure, showing the need for long-term monitoring of the health of retired workers with a history of exposure to coal dust.

Associate Professor Zosky said investigation into CWP control and screening standards could also be useful in other industries in which workers were exposed to dust, such as building and stonemasonry.

For more information or to interview Associate Professor Zosky contact the media office on 6226 2267.

**Information released by:**

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