

Australia: Concerns over official responses to asbestos in children's sand products

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Concerns are mounting for the health of thousands of children, educators and their families after children's coloured sand products were recalled because testing revealed that the products contain asbestos.

Yet, few schools and day care centres using the sand have been closed for its removal. It is shocking that the only Australian state or territory to temporarily shut all affected schools has been the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), centred on Canberra.

Over the past two weeks, about 1,000 schools and early learning centres across Australia have reported using the sand during curriculum activities, and 87 retailers have been involved in a voluntary recall of the products.

While some governments and agencies insist there is a “low risk” of health damage, it is a medical fact that all exposure to asbestos is potentially dangerous. Consisting of tiny fibres, it can be inhaled without knowing it. These fibres can get stuck in your lungs. Even one-time exposure can be harmful, so no amount of asbestos exposure is safe.

The health risks, especially to workers, were known to manufacturers for decades, but use of the material was not completely banned in Australia until 2003. Thousands of people have died from mesothelioma, lung cancer and asbestosis as a result, often many years after their exposure.

Experts have stated that the risk of fatal exposure is less for the types of asbestos—chrysotile and tremolite—detected in the sands than for blue asbestos in mining, but warned of the need to treat the danger seriously, given uncertainty about how long children may have been exposed.

In a statement posted on the Science Media Centre, Dr Ian Musgrave, a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Adelaide, explained: “While less hazardous than blue asbestos, the infamous asbestos at Wittenoom (an Australian asbestos mine), all

types of asbestos can cause mesothelioma, (a rare lung cancer) and asbestosis (interstitial pulmonary fibrosis).”

Musgrave added: “The risk of asbestos-induced disease depends on duration of exposure and the amount of inhaled fibres.” While authorities had reported that no release of respiratory asbestos fibres from the sand had been detected, “we do not have any indication of actual levels of these asbestos forms in the play sand.” He concluded: “While the risk is low, precautions should be taken anyway.”

The crisis first emerged on November 12, when the Australian Competition Consumer Commission (ACCC) issued recall notices over children's sand products that were sold at various retailers. The sand was brightly coloured and designed for children to play with and for educational purposes. It was labelled as Kadink Sand, Educational Colours—Rainbow Sand and Creatistics—Coloured Sand. A voluntary recall was issued on the same day in New Zealand.

The ACCC urged customers to stop using the products immediately and place the sand in heavy-duty plastic bags, double tape them securely and keep them out of reach of children. The agency advised taking precautions such as wearing disposable gloves and a mask and not disposing of the sand in general waste.

Since then, only some schools, preschools and childcare centres have undergone searches, and some full and partial closures have occurred. Multiple schools were temporarily closed in New Zealand.

On November 14, more than a dozen schools in Canberra were closed. By the following Monday, the ACT government had temporarily shut 70 public schools, citing strict safety legislation.

The ACT Work Health and Safety Commissioner Jacqueline Agius initially said that only the ACT had detected products containing chrysotile asbestos. She stated that asbestos found in other samples around the

country was tremolite asbestos, which had “a more rigid fibre.”

After a public debate erupted over why other states and territories had not followed the ACT lead, the federal Albanese Labor government sprang to their defence. Assistant Minister for Health and Aged Care Rebecca White said it was up to individual jurisdictions to decide.

The Queensland state Liberal National Party government then ruled out whole-of-school closures. Its Education Minister John-Paul Langbroek said it was important not to over-react.

Schools in New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria remained open. The Victorian and NSW education departments said they had advice from the ACCC and health departments that the health risk was “low.” The NSW education department said a safety alert had been sent to all its public schools to immediately and safely remove the sand products if they had them.

On November 18, the Tasmanian Liberal government announced that 50 of its public schools would be fully or partially closed that afternoon and on the following day. In addition, 12 Catholic schools and some non-government schools reported being impacted. Over a 24-hour period, an audit was conducted across 200 schools in the state.

Action has been limited elsewhere. In South Australia, more than 300 public schools were found to have the coloured sand, but the state Labor government’s Education Minister Blair Boyer said the advice of regulators, with the exception of the ACT, was not to close schools. Later, there were reports of dozens of schools being shut for cleaning.

Under Western Australia’s state Labor government, the education department said the department of housing and works was removing all coloured sand products. In the Northern Territory, the Country Liberal Party government has not closed any schools or services, even though it said the coloured sand products were found in 41 schools.

Led by the Australian Education Union (AEU), the teacher unions have been complicit. There have been no calls for shutdowns, closures or protections. Not even a media release has been issued. This is despite the fact that all identified forms of asbestos can cause asbestosis, malignant mesothelioma, lung cancer, ovarian cancer, laryngeal cancer and other serious diseases.

According to a 2025 study, 5 percent to 10 percent of people exposed to asbestos at work will develop a related cancer. In most cases, these cancers do not reveal themselves for many years, even decades, as the history of

mesothelioma disease internationally has shown.

The partial school closures in some states have resulted from opposition by worried teachers and parents, with media interviews revealing mounting concerns. A chat on the NSW Teachers Federation Facebook showed that members were both confused and concerned by the government response.

The comments included: “Why is ACT closing schools and not NSW?”

“I have not seen anything, did you see it?”

“A school I worked at last week had some rooms empty for the day as they had used a kinetic sand that week. The rooms were getting cleaned or carpets removed?”

“I know our school probably (including myself) has used that very sand. As usual NSW silence and secretism.”

What has also been revealed is a lack of government quality control and oversight in the importation of manufactured goods, in this case reportedly from China.

An Australian Border Force (ABF) spokesperson said it had strict requirements in place for imported high-risk goods. For many lower-risk goods, however, the ABF considered mandatory testing to be inefficient and costly to industry.

Even the discovery of the asbestos was the result of a one-off test at a laboratory on a new machine, the ACCC said. Despite the sand products entering the country for over five years, they were never previously tested.

An ACCC representative told the media: “That would be an extremely extensive exercise and it’s not currently required under Australian regulation. It’s a matter for suppliers to determine the risk of the products that they’re selling and to engage in appropriate testing.”

In other words, the deadly dangers of asbestos have been left in the hands of profit-driven companies, just as the mining of it was left in the hands of employers for many decades.

More information is yet to emerge. But it is likely, at this early stage, that working-class people are only being shown the tip of the “sand-berg” created by the subordination of basic social and health needs to the profit demands of the capitalist market.



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