

MOVING ON FROM MINEHEALTH ASSESSMENTS

The requirement for health assessments under the Mines Safety and Inspection Regulations 1995 has been repealed following two comprehensive epidemiological reviews conducted by the Department of Mines and Petroleum (DMP).

The department conducted the reviews to determine whether the objectives of the health surveillance system were being achieved. The system was designed to:

- assess the health status of all mining industry employees on a regular basis
- analyse collected data to detect adverse health effects at the earliest opportunity
- enable appropriate and timely corrective action to be taken in order to safeguard the health and well-being of mining industry employees
- provide data for future epidemiological studies.

The department found no evidence that undertaking these health assessments was either preventing or detecting ill health at an early stage. For example, no cases of silicosis have been confirmed in WA miners who commenced work in the industry since 1974.

The epidemiological reviews confirmed that lifestyle factors such as smoking are more likely to have adverse health effects than current mining activities.

The proposal to repeal the requirement for health assessments was endorsed by both industry and unions under the auspices of the tripartite Mining Industry Advisory Committee (MIAC). The Minister for Mines approved the regulatory amendments as the repeal will enable the application of a more risk-based approach to health surveillance, which supports government commitments regarding best practice safety regulation of the Western Australian resources industry.

The deletion of Regulations 3.25 Initial Health Assessment and 3.26 Periodic Health Assessment of the Mines Safety and Inspection Regulations 1995 were included in the recent Mines Safety and Inspection Amendment Regulations 2012.

Consequently, from 12 January 2013, workers on Western Australian mine sites are no longer required to undergo initial and periodic health assessments (commonly known as MineHealth assessments).

However, the requirements to report occupational diseases, undertake specified health assessments and biological monitoring will remain in Part 3 of the regulations.

The review showed no evidence of early health changes resulting from occupational exposure to atmospheric contaminants, such as dust and respirable silica, and exposures have steadily decreased over the past few decades. Nevertheless, the Department will continue to require industry to monitor and report workplace contaminants, including diesel emissions, to ensure workers remain protected. This information is recorded in the CONTAM database.

Under Western Australia's workers' compensation system, all workers employed for the first time in a prescribed workplace on a mine must still have a WorkCover WA baseline hearing test within twelve months of commencing employment. A prescribed workplace is one where workers receive a personal noise dose of 90dB(A) or above during an eight hour day, or its equivalent, and where such a day is representative of the worker's typical work practices. Any workers who receive noise above the peak exposure of 140dB(lin) on one or more occasions, even for a short time, must also be tested.

Pre-employment medical tests are widespread throughout the mining industry and the repeal of the requirement for health assessments does not affect an employer's right to request pre-employment medical checks.

The existing MineHealth database has been retained and current employees may still request access to their own personal data. The database will also continue to be used to provide the Commonwealth, State agencies and approved researchers with de-identified data for bona fide health-related research.

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