

Tasmanian unions call for mandatory labelling of products containing nanomaterials

Unions Tasmania today hosted a panel of experts as part of Safe Work Tasmania Week who explored the growing concerns around the health and safety impacts of nanomaterials on workers and consumers.

Nanotechnology is the engineering of materials at the atomic level. Currently nanotechnology is used in about 800 consumer products and may eventually extend into every industry.

Why is there concern over nanoparticles?

Nanoparticles can be hazardous because of their size, surface area and toxicity. They can be inhaled or absorbed through skin.

Sunscreen manufacturers are adding nanoparticles to sunscreens to make sun-blocking ingredients like titanium dioxide and zinc oxide rub on clear instead of white. These nanoparticles are being added without labelling or reliable safety information—and they may pose potential threats to human health.

Research published in *Nature Nanotechnology* by researchers from the University of Edinburgh/MRC Centre for Inflammation Research (CIR) in Scotland, has shown that multi walled carbon nano tubes share some of the same needle-thin characteristics as asbestos fibres and when mice were exposed to nano tubes, they had the same physical reaction as an asbestos fibre in the mesothelium.¹

Other research reports that when nanomaterials are deposited in the gut or lung, they can enter the blood stream and travel to the liver and brain.²

Australian and International Regulation

There is no doubt that nanotechnology has great potential, but many believe that regulation is needed. Despite the growing evidence to show that nanomaterials present unique health and safety hazards, Regulators, including those in Australia, rely on regulations that weren't designed to protect workers or consumers against nano sized materials.

Nanomaterials are already in products on Tasmanian shelves and a recent report revealed that over 10 000 tonnes of nanomaterials are used in commercial production in Australia each year.

Tasmania has no nano-specific safety assessment process to protect workers, consumers and the environment from unsafe exposure and no labelling requirement for nanomaterials in products.

¹ <http://www.sciam.com/article.cfm?id=carbon-nanotube-danger>

² *Biochem Soc Trans.* 2007 Jun;35(Pt 3):527-31.

In 2004, the United Kingdom's Royal Society recommended that given their toxicity risks, nanomaterials should be subject to rigorous safety assessments prior to their commercial release, and factories and laboratories should treat nanomaterials as if they were hazardous.

The NSW Legislative Council Standing Committee on State Development's recent report: "Nanotechnology in New South Wales" made sixteen recommendations to government which included mandatory product labelling.

Unions are urging the State Government to adopt the following interim measures to protect Tasmanian workers who may be at risk of exposure and consumers who have a right to know what is in the products they are buying:

- Mandatory labelling for engineered nanomaterials used in the workplace
- Mandatory ingredient labelling requirements for sunscreens and cosmetics including the identification of nanoscale materials
- Food labels identifying the presence of nanoscale materials
- A state-wide mandatory reporting scheme for companies who use, manufacture, transport or dispose of nanomaterials

Attending the seminar today Unions Tasmania Secretary, Simon Cocker said:

"I have written to the minister today in her capacity as Workplace Relations Minister and as Minister for Consumer Protection to draw her attention to our concerns regarding the use of nanotechnology in certain products which may pose a health risk to current and future generations of Tasmanians."

"The lack of any labelling means that the public is none the wiser to the risks of choosing a certain sunscreen or shampoo containing nanoparticles and sending people off to work in factories that handle this potentially toxic technology."

"The State Government is to be congratulated for the important work it is doing to develop a prioritised removal policy for asbestos in Tasmania. It would however, be deeply unfortunate if at the same time we did not heed the warning of many of our scientists about the risks some nanoparticles may pose to the health of Tasmanians.

"It is imperative that, thirty years from now, we do not experience another asbestos-like tragedy and bear the shame of a generation looking back at our inaction on this issue and asking the question: "Why didn't they do something?" said Mr Cocker

Simon Cocker and presenters at the seminar will be available for interviews during morning tea break (10.55am) and following the presentation at 1pm – Goulburn Room – Mercure Hotel Hobart

Media Contacts: Simon Cocker : 0419 402377 / Susan Wallace: 0418372198