

LETTER

SILICOSIS

Close on the heels of a National Review Meeting on health, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) held a meeting on the issue of Silicosis on April 24, 2007 under the Chairmanship of Dr Justice Shivaraj V Patil, Member, NHRC. The issue of silicosis, an occupational hazard was flagged at the meeting on Health, held in the month of March 2007.

It was highlighted at the meeting that the ILO Convention 176 has not been ratified by the Indian Government, precisely because the industries have not yet reached a stage where they could adopt self-regulation for safety appliances of the workers. It was also said that it has to be seen whether the Factory Act is adequate and whether more needs to be added to the Act. It was also mentioned that basic engineering method should be adopted to reduce the dust and silica in the workplace like construction site and reduce the pollution. Further it was stated that there is a need to create—awareness among Factory owners on the issue of Silicosis, which should be accompanied with punitive measures.

NHRC expressed its concern that though the Factories Act 1948 had declared Silicosis as a notified disease' yet there is no authentic reporting system or statistics of the affected people. According to the report prepared by an NGO on the Jhabua district Madhya Pradesh, it was observed that most of the workers were migrants from the neighbouring states. The study revealed that once a person was exposed to silica, the disease progresses even without further exposure. It was found that in a large number of workers the symptoms of the disease appeared after they went back to their native villages. The study pointed out that as Silicosis is a fatal and incurable disease, those having symptoms would eventually die. It was further stated that poverty or economic necessity forced people to take up such vocations leading to exposure to silica. It was highly felt that the disease had been ignored by Health, Labour and Industries Departments or Ministries.

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