

RETIRED STONEMASON HIGHLIGHTS DANGERS OF WORKING IN DUSTY ENVIRONMENTS WITHOUT REAL TIME MONITORING



Retired stonemason and builder in the construction industry, Gordon Somerville, 62, was diagnosed with a range of life threatening diseases in 2015, linking back to respirable crystalline silica (RCS) exposure. *Gordon Somerville*



Gordon began working in the trade in 1976 and worked on a variety of projects, including stone carving and demolition projects and went on to run his own masonry company, before exposure to dangerous dusts in the workplace throughout his career eventually caught up with him and changed his life.

In a bid to highlight the dangers of working with RCS content and to improve awareness and education, Gordon agreed to talk to Trolex the leading manufacturer of health and safety technology products for workers operating in hazardous environments, following the launch of their Air XS Silica Monitor, the world's first real time detector for silica particulates.

Gordon tells us: "I am a stonemason and builder by trade and began working in the construction industry when I left school in 1976. No matter what type of work I was carrying out or who I was working for, daily dust was involved and lots of it. I didn't realise dust was making me ill but during my career there were clues which should have raised a red flag.

In the early 1990's, I was required to have my dust-blocked sinuses scraped out and this was the first time I was informed abnormalities had showed up in my lung X-Rays. In 2000, I required operations for Carpal and Cubital Tunnel syndrome, and I was diagnosed with Hand Vibration Syndrome. Despite all this, I still felt reasonably fit."

However, this changed in 2014 when he collapsed on the scaffold at work. Following extensive tests, the true extent of the

damage years of dust exposure had caused became clear. He was now suffering from systemic diseases. The dust was in his bloodstream and this was just the starting point.

Glyn Pierce-Jones, Trolex CEO asks: If you could change anything about the approach and attitudes you, and others, had towards particulate safety, what would it be? For example, what measures in dust reduction would you like to see introduced?

Gordon Somerville: I think education on all matters concerning dust is very important and there should be a requirement for any employee on entering a dusty occupation to know the dangers. To this day there is a severe lack of awareness of the dangers of dust and the diseases it can cause, not only throughout the dust workforce but also within the medical profession. For example, in my experience, many GP's have never heard of half the diseases dust can cause, never mind of their connection with dust exposure.

When I was attending college we asked about the dangers of dust, namely silicosis, and were confidently informed that if we worked outside, we had nothing to worry about as the air current would blow the dust away. During the 80's and 90's dust was only considered a nuisance, almost no one wore a respirator.

If the workforce understands the danger, knows what they are protecting themselves and others against and understands the reasons for complying with dust controls, then there is a much greater probability that they will at least attempt to reduce their dust production. The unaware cannot protect themselves from the unknown.

Ignorance is still the biggest killer. If I was in a position of authority, I would advocate for a National Awareness campaign informing everyone who has any connection with dust, about all the dangers and associated diseases which go hand in hand with exposure to respirable crystalline silica.

Glyn Pierce-Jones: What would your reaction have been if you'd had an Air XS device on your site, telling you that you were exposed to excessive levels of RCS? Would this knowledge

have made any difference to your work life?

Gordon Somerville: A measurement device in any enclosed environment such as a banker shed or a stone cutting yard, etc. is a perfect example of where monitoring equipment could prevent so many illnesses, by providing real time air quality information. Many workers, who previously worked in enclosed sheds which were considered to be safe (therefore no mask required or any extraction systems in place) are now either sick or dead.

If I had been aware of the dangers of dust while also having continual air quality information at hand to back up any decisions on which safety provisions, suppression methods or respiratory protections were required at any given moment, I would not now be suffering from several degenerative and disabling incurable diseases.

The major cause of many occupational diseases is ignorance, a lack of awareness or basic information. I would suggest that not knowing how much dust is in the air at any given moment in time is a serious lack of essential information and any enclosed area where dust is created should be monitored and recorded by law.

Glyn Pierce-Jones: What is your life like now, and how much has silicosis affected you?

Gordon Somerville: If you let dust get anywhere into your body, it can cause all kinds of totally unexpected chaos. I can assure you, no one ever mentioned any of this to me. I was always a very fit and active person and was rarely found inside the house. Today, I am housebound.

But it is the pain that's worst of all, something that I suffer from constantly and all over. Dusty diseases do not usually come in ones, as they are systemic diseases. If you only end up suffering from one, you can consider yourself lucky.

There are lots of conditions no one ever mentioned were associated with exposure to crystalline silica dust. I was recently diagnosed with liver disease, as well as dust causing inflammation in my brain, and my hands are practically useless at times.

These are just a few of the possible outcomes nobody warns you about when you are tearing into a lump of stone with your angle grinder and turbo blade without using suppression or wearing a mask. All the diseases currently affecting me were 100% preventable.

The only cure for dusty diseases at the moment is not to let dust get inside the body, which means in order for silica induced diseases to be classed as 100% preventable, awareness of the hazard throughout the exposed population is required. Unfortunately, most of this information is not generally available to the exposed workforce. The warnings about RCS should include all the diseases associated with exposure to RCS dust, all the diseases that seem to be ignored and are classed as rare but seem to be rather common amongst dusty workers.

I believe silicosis should be returned to the reportable diseases list along with the addition of all the other diseases known to be associated with dust. No one knows how many workers actually get sick in this country, as figures for these diseases are only guesstimated, many are not even included.

Apart from making the population aware of all the dangers associated with dust and teaching the workforce how to safely suppress and control emissions, the only other options are to ban dust production completely or go down the lines of other countries and restrict all work that produces dust to trained licence holders.

I would suggest education is simpler.

Silica is the biggest risk to construction workers after asbestos, from the inhalation of silica dust particulates in the workplace and an estimated 600,000 workers are exposed to silica each year in the UK.

Yet silicosis is entirely preventable and the Air XS Silica Monitor is set to revolutionise worker safety within the construction industry by delivering real-time detection of dangerous respirable crystalline silica (RCS) particulates in airborne dust mixtures - on the job.

The Air XS Silica Monitor displays the presence of RCS mass by volume, while also being able to distinguish the presence of RCS within dust mixtures. In addition, the Air XS Silica Monitor can track changing concentrations of RCS content over time, letting workers know if the amount of RCS in their workspace is increasing as they work and when it has risen to dangerous levels.

Glyn Pierce-Jones, Trolex CEO said: "This is an exciting product in real time silica dust monitoring. The Air XS is a global-leading solution to an increasing health problem in many industries. Real time silica monitoring is the safest and most cost-effective way to promote workers' health in the industries associated with RCS."

The Air XS will substantially reduce the number of surveys needed onsite, improve processes, create smart ventilation and extraction systems and identify inefficiencies".

Issued on behalf of Trolex

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The logo for Trolex, featuring the word "TROLEX" in a bold, black, sans-serif font. The letter "X" is stylized with a blue double-stroke effect.