

Health and Safety Alert Identifying Potentially Hazardous Materials



This Health and Safety Alert provides information to anyone who may be planning to perform work on older items or infrastructure and comes as a result of a recent significant work environment incident at ECU.

What happened?

A staff member entered a teaching workshop and noticed a student working in a large cloud of dust. The work was stopped immediately. The student advised the staff member that they had been instructed to prepare an old cast iron bathtub for repainting and chose to use an electric grinder with a flapper-disk to do it. The workshop was closed, the mechanical extraction system was operational and the student was wearing the required personal protective equipment (PPE), including respiratory protection for the task. The staff member who stopped the job had concerns the paint on the bathtub may contain lead. As a precaution, the student was instructed to clean down, shower, change clothes and the workshop was secured so further investigations could be conducted.

Initial basic tests indicated lead was present in the settled dust in the workshop, hence the workshop remained secured and precautionary biological lead testing arranged. Staff and students who were in the vicinity were offered precautionary biological lead tests. Tests conducted have returned results below the acceptable limit. Since the incident, the workshop has undergone a decontamination clean and a plan for monitoring of the extraction system developed to ensure the lead levels are below the acceptable level, before the workshop is returned to service.

What went wrong?

The potential for lead based paint being present on the bathtub was not identified because a Health and Safety risk assessment had not been conducted prior to the activity commencing. Whilst the investigation found that no one in the vicinity of the work had been exposed to levels above the occupational exposure limit, the workshop is unable to be used until extensive and costly decontamination cleaning has been completed.

How do we minimise the risk?

It is important that a risk assessment is conducted to identify and control any health and safety hazards before any new work commences or changes are made. This must be communicated to those who are likely to be exposed to the hazards including staff, students and visitors.

Controls should include actions such as:

- hazard awareness training.
- a safe work procedure that clearly outlines a step by step process for conducting the work in a manner that prevents the potential for harm. All identified hazards and required controls must be included in the procedure. For example, precautionary testing for the presence of hazardous materials such as lead and asbestos before work commences.
- ensuring PPE including Respiratory Protective Equipment is appropriate for the tasks being conducted and that fit testing is conducted.

Schools and Centres should as soon as possible:

- Communicate this alert to staff, students and contractors and add it as an item on the next Local Health and Safety Committee meeting; and
- Review their health and safety hazard risk registers in light of this incident, consider current and proposed activities and where applicable update the register to include any identified hazards and controls.