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Stink over fragrances

Smelly products fail sniff test

FRAGRANCES are on the nose, with schools, hospitals and workplaces urged to ban perfume, air freshener and smelly cleaning products.

Research has found that three million Australian adults are “sensitive” to chemical products, leaving some with migraines, breathing difficulties, seizures and asthma attacks.

It has prompted calls to ban stinky products from offices, classrooms and hospitals around the country.

Among products failing to pass the sniff test are fragrant cleaners, air fresheners and even sanitisers in hospitals. But other whiffs that have become a worry include personal perfumes, hand lotion, hair spray and scented laundry products.

Melbourne University professor of civil engineering Anne Steinemann said Australian businesses were increasingly turning their noses up at fragrant chemical products.

MONIQUE HORE

“Fragrance-free policies are gaining ground in Australia and being very positively received,” Prof Steinemann said.

“It comes down to the fact that a person is more important than a product. These products can cause people to have a seizure, headaches, asthma attacks or other illnesses. It can be very serious.”

A 2011 Health Department guide warned Victorian hospitals that multiple chemical sensitivity was a “debilitating condition” that could be triggered by food, drink, cleaning products, or the aftershave and hair care of hospital staff.

It called for hospitals to draft policies for dealing with patients sensitive to chemical products.

Fragrance-free policies are common in the US and workers have successfully launched lawsuits against employers

over colleagues’ perfumes.

A Detroit radio DJ won a \$10.5 million case that centred on claims she was fired after complaints including about colleagues’ perfume.

Disability Learning Management Solutions principal consultant Monica Leachy called for national building guidelines that controlled use of indoor fragrances.

“Where employees have complained and asked for fragrance-free options, they have often been branded a hypochondriac,” she said.

“It is hard for them to get traction because there is not a lot of empathy for people who have multiple chemical sensitivity. But the people who are sensitive are the canaries in the coalmines. Businesses that don’t pay attention to it could miss out — customers will shop online instead of in stores with deodorisers.”

monique.hore@news.com.au