

Occupational Health and Safety: The Truth is...

By: Jacob Z. Raskevicius

A recent article in the Globe and Mail entitled “*Workplace Deaths Spiking, Study Shows*” highlights a very concerning statistic about health and safety in Canadian workplaces. The article states that in 2005 there were 1,097 work associated fatalities reported in Canada. This number shows a sharp increase of roughly 45% from 2003, at which time there were 758 reported workplace fatalities. To place an even bolder exclamation mark on the end of this statistic, for every one of these work-related deaths there were an estimated 390 serious work-related injuries and illnesses in the last year.

These numbers should be troublesome to all employees and employers alike, from both a business and a humanitarian perspective. However, there are some signs of hope on the occupational health and safety front. In recent years, considerable efforts have been taken across Canada to improve the safety of our working environments. Specifically, the annual report from Ontario’s Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) demonstrates a significant reduction in work-related injury and illness over the past decade. The report also explains new initiatives that are in place which should prevent this trend from snowballing.

Regarding the recent spike in work-related fatalities, it is believed that a significant chunk of these deaths are a result of work-related illnesses that people have developed over the long term from working under risky conditions. These conditions existed many years ago before the occupational health and safety (OHS) initiatives of today were implemented (i.e. asbestos poisoning, etc.). Sadly, we now seem to be experiencing the ill-fated effects from our lack of foresight in terms of OHS. The Canadian people can let out a small sigh of relief that this sharp increase in work-related fatalities does not seem to be directly correlated to a deficiency in attention or action toward the health and safety concerns of Canadian employees.

Unfortunately, the story unfolding in the social services sector is just the opposite of these positive indicators represented in most Canadian industries. Recent studies sponsored by McMaster University show that incident of work-related mental illness and injury in the social services sector is on the rise. According to the study, the primary reasons for this rise are symptomatic of the general restructuring of services in this sector. Employees are becoming exposed in varying degrees to an increasingly stressful working environment based on the following factors: lack of adequate funding, increased workloads, more frequent violent episodes from clients, workplace bullying and little control of work pace and processes. Symptoms of stress related illness commonly present themselves in the form of headaches, fatigue, stomach disruptions, insomnia, depression, high blood pressure and other various aches and pains. Also, workplace bullying and violence have brought about increases in the number of injuries and cases of post-traumatic stress disorder, major depression, chronic fatigue syndrome and suicidal thoughts amongst employees.

The preceding paragraph should set the spider-senses tingling for any social services organizations that have not yet taken proactive/corrective measures to improve OHS issues or have notably high case rates of mental illness in their employees. It is imperative that those, who are not yet on board the OHS bandwagon, climb on board and do so quickly. After all, the list of merits with fostering and maintaining a healthy and safe workplace for staff is a long one. Not only are healthier people more reliable, their good health translates into better performance and cost savings for the organization on many fronts.

Being proactive is the key to reducing workplace injuries and illnesses. The same studies noted above indicate some of the variables believed to be behind the trend of reduced work-related injury and illness throughout Canadian industry overall. These variables are as follows:

- ◆ An increase in health, well being and safety training;
- ◆ An increase in the executive functions of the joint health and safety committee (JHSC) (i.e. approving initiatives as opposed to simply recommending them);
- ◆ Greater employee involvement in the JHSC;
- ◆ Greater accountability and direct involvement of upper management in matters surrounding health and safety issues on both a proactive and reactive level.

In recent years, Canadian organizations have made great progress in the fight to reduce work-related injuries and illnesses. The majority of successes revolving around OHS issues can be attributed to the above noted variables and associated initiatives. It is vital that employers consider OHS issues in their day-to-day operations and decision-making processes, which will consequently enable them to tailor their OHS programs to their specific organizational needs.

The importance of a healthy working environment cannot be underestimated or disregarded. The frightening truth of the matter is this - there are very few people who can say that they have not felt the effects of a work-related accident or illness in one way or another.

1) André Picard, "Workplace deaths spiking, study finds," *The Globe and Mail* (December 12, 2006)

2) McMaster University, (December 19, 2006). *Workplace Safety and Insurance Board Site*, Retrieved December 19, 2006 from <http://www.wsib.on.ca/wsib/wsibsite.nsf/public/researchresults>