

BULLETIN

Safety conference a first for HSA

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When CBC news reporter David McKie was assigned to work on a story about the labour movements annual Day of Mourning for injured workers held every April, he began to look into workplace injury statistics. What he found shocked him into action.

He launched a three-year investigation into workplace safety in Canada, and discovered that health care and social services workers sustain more workplace injuries due to violence than workers in any other profession. He also found that these workers are even more at risk than the statistics indicate.

"Often, accident statistics don't show the whole story," he said. "They don't include claims that were denied or ones not recognized as workplace related ... like occupational diseases that occur years afterwards." These findings are incorporated into his two-part documentary series, *Dying for a job*, followed by *Out of sync*.

David McKie was the keynote speaker at HSA's first-ever occupational health and safety conference, held in November. Almost 50 stewards and activists from all over BC attended the event.

Heather Sapergia, chair of HSA's occupational health and safety committee, said the aim of the conference was to bring together experienced workplace safety activists.

"The conference highlighted some of the new, emerging issues that are arising in health care," she said. "For this reason, we wanted to go beyond the basics; we saw a need for a venue where experienced safety stewards could learn advanced advocacy, as well as share information."

"We limited participation to safety stewards who had completed the union's steward training level one and attended at least six joint union/employer OH&S meetings at their workplace. HSA-appointed representatives to other provincial OH&S committees were also eligible to attend," she added.

"I was really impressed with how well organized the conference was," Sapergia said. "It's been a dream of my predecessors on the board to do this and it's been a couple of years, at least, in the making. The overwhelming response from people was they found it very, very useful."

"It was practical, hands-on information rather than theory," Sapergia said. "We also did some refreshers and in-depth work on how to conduct investigations as health and safety stewards."

One of the participants was Cathryn Wheeler-Bishop, a physiotherapist at Lions Gate Hospital. After conducting several workplace investigations, quarterly inspections and handling incident reports, she had a number of questions. "It was very fortuitous this conference came up," she said, "because I knew that I'd get a chance to talk to other people who had been stewards longer than I had and get answers, share ideas."

Marty Lovick, HSAs health and safety officer who helped organize the conference, said participation was designed to provide an advanced level of knowledge to supplement the basic information safety stewards receive in their initial training. -For a long time, we had determined we need to offer something that is invigorating and challenging for people who are experienced advocates, and I believe we did that," he said.

One area of focus was violence in the workplace and its prevention. Lovick said statistics show that health care workers in BC are four times more likely to be injured due to violence than people in other occupations, including those perceived as more dangerous, such as policing.

In the last health science professionals contract, the union negotiated language compelling the employer to deal with violence in the workplace. -As a result of successfully incorporating that language, we wanted to make sure our stewards are aware of that language and its implications and how to address the issues," Sapergia said.

WorkSafeBC (formerly WCB) prevention officers were invited to speak at the conference since part of their mandate is to conduct audits on high risk facilities which generate a higher number of compensation claims. HSA education officer Leila Lolua said the work-SafeBC officers helped HSAs safety stewards see first-hand what help is available through WorkSafeBC. -They had gone into 132 health care facilities to try and make the employers do what they are supposed to do by law ... and they were able to describe all the policies and infrastructure they are required to put in place to try to eliminate violence in the workplace," Lolua said.

Wheeler-Bishop rates McKies presentation as one of the highlights of the conference. -The variety of speakers, and the level of the speakers they had, was excellent," she said. -The conference flew by. It was a two-day conference and I was quite enthused about it because I knew the next speaker would be good, and the speaker after that would be good and so on."


-I really liked their choice of guests, particularly ones from WorkSafeBC," said Charlie wheat, a residential care worker at South peace Child Development Centre in Dawson Creek. He learned that the prevention officers are committed to preventing violence and doing what they can within their scope of responsibility to improve safety at workplaces -It kind of brought it to light that WorkSafeBC is not just about compensation claims being rejected."

Lovick agrees. -While we have significant concerns about how WorkSafeBC denies claims for our members, it was gratifying to know that another of their departments understands the issues of risk and prevention and best practices."

Wheat is currently a member of HSAs education committee and an assistant steward. He is a former safety steward and was a member of the OH&S committee when the idea of holding an HSA health and safety conference began to develop three years ago. For wheat, attending the conference was an opportunity to see the fruition of the original discussions. -It was a wealth of information and I was impressed with what they had done," he said.

Another presentation was about the lessons learned from ergonomic studies. Ergonomist Judy village with the UBC School of Environmental Health spoke about her research involving lab technologists and sonographers. wheeler-bishop said the workshop was valuable. -It was really good. If I ever have to do an inspection in those areas, Ill know what to look for."

Asked why OH&S is an important component of union work, Wheeler-Bishop replies without hesitation: -The health and safety of my coworkers is really important to me. These are the people I work with. These are the people I know. I dont want them in toxic environments," she said. -Im in a small community hospital. I know a lot of the people who work there. I want to be sure theyre working safe. I really take my OH&S position quite seriously."

HSAs first OH&S conference achieved its goal to upgrade the knowledge of safety stewards and address new, emerging issues in occupational health and safety issues health care. -The overwhelming feeling is we need to do this again, " Sapergia said. 

David McKies CBC radio documentaries on workplace injuries Dying for a job (2006) and Out of sync (2007)

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