



At last: WorkSafeBC action on ultrasonographer injuries

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HSA OVERCOMES YEARS OF WORKSAFE BC INDIFFERENCE TO HIGH INJURY RATE

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IN JANUARY, HSA AND WORKSAFE BC began distribution of a publication that aims to reduce the high level of work-related injuries for ultrasonographers. Its a major achievement, and one which came only after years of effort by the Health Sciences Association.

I first became aware of the high level of repetitive strain injury among this specialized group of members when I worked as an Employee Health Services Consultant at Royal Columbian Hospital during the early 1990s. An injured ultrasonographer was seeking compensation with the support of the medical imaging supervisor and her manager, who agreed that her required duties were the cause of her injury. The Workers Compensation Board denied the claim at first, but I attended her hearing, supported her appeal and in the end it was allowed. During the process, I learned about the astonishingly high rate of injury among ultrasonographers and the WCBs reluctance to deal with the problem.

Throughout the 1990s research done worldwide began to establish the risks faced by ultrasonographers every day. In BC, much of this research was done by universities, the Occupational Health and Safety Agency for Healthcare, and leading ergonomists like Judy Village. Literature outlining best practices was published, and it became clear that the inherent characteristics of the equipment used in BC led to awkward posture, force and repetitive motion.

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Above all, these studies objectively demonstrated that ultrasonographers were suffering injury rates unheard of in modern times. Research showed that 80 per cent of these workers suffered pain and a degree of disability due to their work, and 20 per cent were unable to complete their career in the field. Statistics like these in any other industry would be a scandal, but with less than 400 professionals working in the province at any one time the issue stayed under the radar.


For several years HSA made serious efforts to force WorkSafe BC to change the way they dealt with claims by ultrasonographers. The response was indifferent, despite the fact that virtually all claims were allowed after they were examined by the independent appeal tribunal.

The WorkSafe BC prevention department, unlike the adjudication arm, is able to work in favor of better practices to reduce injury. Knowing this, HSA approached the prevention department two years ago with a proposal to develop a best practice prevention package for ultrasonographers. It would begin with a project at two hospitals on Vancouver island, and it was agreed that WorkSafe BC and HSA would jointly fund the publication.

The resulting material has been circulated to ultrasonographers around the province, students in BCITs

training program, members of the BC Ultrasonographers Society, all BC health authorities and is posted on the WorkSafe BC website. You can find it here:

- www2.worksafebc.com/Portals/HealthCare/GeneralErgonomics.asp

The material will not only help lower injury rates through prevention, it should also help ensure that injured ultrasonographers receive fair treatment for their claims because WorkSafe BC itself helped produce it and have it posted on their web site. 

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