



OHS conference sets priorities to make you safer

September 26, 2014

BY DAVID DURNING, HSA OHS OFFICER

HSA's Occupational Health and Safety Conference held in June provided a great opportunity for OHS activists to connect with each other, share information and plan for the future.

Keynote speakers Dr. Joti Samra and Al Biekša contributed significantly to a two-day event designed to provide tools, resources and planning opportunities for nearly 100 HSA joint occupational health and safety committee representatives from all across the province.

Dr. Samra, a registered psychologist based in Vancouver, focused on the National Standard for Physiological Health and Safety in the Workplace and the Guarding Minds at Work project which provides resources for identifying and responding to workplace factors that undermine mental health.

Biekša, of the BC Federation of Labour's OHS Centre, spoke about improving return to work outcomes by identifying and removing barriers which prevent injured workers from participating fully in their jobs. The participation of HSA Enhanced Disability Management Program (EDMP) representatives greatly enhanced the discussion that followed.

Conference participants took part in a series of skills development workshops to assist them in their OHS roles. Sessions on how to conduct workplace inspections, incident investigations and on how to effectively make OHS recommendations to employers were all part of the agenda.

The last afternoon of the conference was dedicated to planning for the future. Each participant identified their own priorities to work on in conjunction with their workplace OHS committees and conference participants as a whole developed a consensus around the most pressing issues to deal with in the coming year.

Education was identified as a key priority for the coming year. That included more targeted educational opportunities for OHS committee members - especially training in conducting workplace inspections and incident investigations. As well, there was an identified need to provide broad-based education for all HSA members about their basic OHS rights and how to connect and work with their workplace OHS committees.

Another top priority identified was the need to deal with barriers that make it difficult for OHS committee representatives to do their jobs. Many reported that even though employers are legally required to provide paid time for OHS representatives to attend meetings and to carry out workplace inspections and incident investigations, in reality this fundamental right to participate is severely restricted. HSA safety representatives are regularly denied by their managers the time they are entitled to for carrying out their duties. Also concerning is the fact that most committee reps do not have their regular work covered while they are engaged in OHS responsibilities. This creates stress for them and often leads to resentment from co-workers who may be expected to cover for them while they are engaged in their OHS work.

The third priority identified was the need to find ways of escalating OHS matters more expeditiously so that unresolved safety and health concerns are not left unresolved for long periods of time, as seems to be the case currently.

The goal now will be to work on these priorities so that when we reconvene in 2016 for the next HSA Occupational Health and Safety Conference, we can look back and reflect on our successes in all these areas.

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180 East Columbia
New Westminster, BC V3L 0G7

Website
www.hsabc.org

Telephone 604-517-0994
1-800-663-2017