Managing health hazards at work

Controlling health hazards are an important part of meeting obligations to provide a safe workplace, safe equipment and safe work activities. It's also an important part of securing the health of workers and, ultimately, business health, as explained by Jo Kitney.

In our competitive economic climate, managing health hazards, meeting obligations and securing worker health are business risks that should be managed with the same diligence as risks such as financial management and reputation.

Health hazards

In its broadest sense health hazards capture known, new and emerging risks. This is relevant to metal manufacturing where new technologies, substances and processes can introduce risks that may only be realised through the passage of time and effects on workers' health.

Although hazards may differ between businesses, the main health and safety hazards for metal manufacturing involve the movement of people, goods and vehicles into, around and out of workshops. Non-movement causes arise from use of machinery, noise, vibration and hazardous substances – particularly metalworking fluids, degreasing solvents, dust or fumes from welding, soldering, coating and painting.

Ill health and injuries

Metal product manufacturing employs 15% of workers within the manufacturing industry and accounts for over 20% of serious workers' compensation claims, with the highest incident rate recorded in sheet metal product manufacturing[1].

Injuries commonly experienced by workers in metal manufacturing are lacerations to the hands and fingers, metal fragments in eyes, muscle and tendon sprains and strains in the back, shoulder, knees and wrists and lacerations to the forearm. Occupational diseases are dermatitis, deafness, asthma, hand arm vibration and back, hand, shoulder and neck problems.

What the law says

Health and safety laws aim to stop anyone from being killed, injured or becoming ill because of a workplace and work being done. For obvious health hazards, such as hazardous substances and noise, regulations prescribe their management or codes of practice guide how risks should be addressed.

Businesses should ensure that health and safety arrangements at work provide for these health hazards as well as those for which legislation has not yet laid down requirements for management.

Legislation is, for the most part, reactive and prescribes actions based on knowledge and evidence built up over time. Yet, there is a wide range of ways in which health can be affected by work – more than those laid down in legislation or codes of practice – with their management falling under the broader legal obligations for risk management.

At times, the precautionary principles commonly associated with environmental management need to be applied, with action taken to protect health even in the absence of prescribed legislation and codes of practice. There is enough information available within Australia and overseas for informed decisions to be made and worker health protected.

Managing health hazards at work

Managing health hazards requires a good understanding of how health may be affected, through direct cause or contributory factor, and taking action to control hazards.

There is a cycle in managing health hazards at work that links health and safety legislation with workers' compensation. Where prevention and management fail, ill health or injury will result.

Health hazard control measures should include preventing or reducing exposure to hazards, monitoring control measures in place, monitoring workers health and, if necessary, health surveillance to identify if workers are experiencing effects of exposure to hazards. Early recognition and intervention will address issues early on and reduce the likelihood of these progressing to a workers' compensation claim; a better outcome for the business and the worker[2].

The 5 step approach to risk management of (1) assess, (2) plan, (3) take action, (4) monitor and (5) review provides the basis for action, with the following questions guiding control measures:

- What are the hazards and what are the risks?
- Who is at risk and how? Are some employees more at risk than others?
- What legislation, codes of practice or industry standards apply?
- What control measures are already in place? What further actions need to be taken?
- How will control measures fit within the broader health and safety management?
- What are the responsibilities for managers and workers?
- Is specialist help needed?
- What records need to be kept?

Taking action

Take the time to look at whether the health hazards in your business are managed. Is there a health hazard risk profile and are control measures in place? Are workers experiencing ill health or injury? Are workers' compensation premiums below the industry average?

If you can't answer 'yes' to each of these questions, then take the time to review the management of health hazards at work. Prevention is the best defence – against ill health and injury, prosecution and workers' compensation claims. AMT

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1. Compendium of Workers' Compensation Statistics Australia 2008-2009, Safe Work Australia
2. Using OHS to drive down workers' compensation premiums, http://kitneyohs.com.au/#/kitneys-column/4553828391