Workplace Safety

Workplace Safety was among the issues raised by many participants during the Conversation on Health. Work environment, prevention and health promotion, and administration were highlighted in many discussions and submissions. Here is a selection of what British Columbians had to say on the subject of workplace safety.

Workplace Environment

In general, participants feel that workplace conditions are not good and contribute negatively to employees’ health. Many submissions indicate that chronic illness, stress and addictions are the result of unsafe office practices, long hours of work and harassment in the workplace. Others think environmental causes such as smoking, exposure to asbestos, and improper office cleaning techniques increase the risk to workers.

Many people believe that introducing new rules and regulations will make the workplace safer. Some want increased anti-bullying and no smoking legislation implemented, and others think that regular working hours, and reducing overtime and split shifts would be a good idea. Suggestions also included more regulation surrounding air quality and hazardous products.

They need to outlaw smoking in front of the main entrances at British Columbia hospitals. If a smoking area is needed, they need to locate it somewhere totally out of the way of the general public.

– Web Dialogue, Victoria

Prevention and Health Promotion

There was general consensus among contributors to the Conversation on Health that a focus on workplace wellness is important. The majority of people think that a new focus on health promotion at work will help employees to be happier and more productive. Suggestions to accomplish this goal include providing exercise facilities and healthy food, inspecting the workplace for air quality and ergonomics, and covering massage therapy treatments.
We have to shine the spotlight on lack of occupational health because it causes chronic disease. Education and legislation enables change. One gram of prevention is worth a kilogram of cure.

–Regional Forum, Vancouver

Administration

Many people believe that new rules for the administration of workplace safety are needed. Some submissions proposed that WorkSafe BC should have an increased ability to review complaints about safety issues at work. Others suggested that an independent investigative body be set up, or that the courts review workplace safety issues in the event that complaints go unresolved.

Conclusion

The majority of participants in the Conversation on Health believe that employers and the government should provide a safer and healthier work environment for British Columbians. They suggested that wellness programs, including nutrition, fitness and education on health lifestyles, would improve workplace conditions, while stricter rules around environmental determinants and employee behaviour would reduce the risk to employees’ health.
Workplace Safety

This chapter includes the following topics:

- **Work Environment**
- **Prevention and Health Promotion**
- **Administration**

**Related Electronic Written Submissions**

| Submission to the BC Conversation on Health | Submitted by the Victorian Order of Nurses for Canada |
| Submission to the Conversation on Health | Submitted by the BC Cancer Agency |

**Related Chapters**

Many of the topics discussed by participants in the Conversation on Health overlap; additional feedback related to this theme may be found in other chapters including: **Morale** and **Patient Safety**.

**Work Environment** (asbestos, smoking, etc.)

**Comments and Concerns**

- Working conditions are not good.
- Many chronic diseases are related to activities at the workplace (brick layers/osteoarthritis, sports players).
- Worksites may indirectly support addictions with long work hours and shift work.
- Workplace bullying can lead to chronic illnesses.
- Workplace violence causes people to keep returning to the health care system for treatment.
- No assistance is available to the patient who displays the symptoms of anxiety, depression and other illnesses resulting from being bullied at work.
Environmental and occupational triggers such as toxic chemicals cause many people to become ill with cancer and respiratory disease.

Tree planters and produce harvesters are exposed to dangerous chemicals and do not clean up properly. They are not informed about the dangers of these chemicals.

The Government of British Columbia should not have rescinded non-smoking regulations in the workplace.

The Government needs to partner with employers to ensure worker safety from carcinogens.

Nurses are being put at risk of being infected with diseases because unsafe cleaning techniques make hospitals unsafe.

Provide more funding for ceiling lifts and other equipment in hospitals so that staff members do not need a no-lift policy to avoid injuries.

Why do they use toxic cleaners in hospitals? Get rid of every cleaning product that needs a Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System label. There are better, safer, cheaper, non-toxic cleaning products sold all over North America. Staff and patients will benefit from that simple change.

Why does the hospital in Chilliwack have no staff change rooms, shower rooms?

Hospitals are not secure enough and, as a result, staff members are put in danger every day.

Smoking is allowed at hospital entrances and people entering or leaving must breathe in second-hand smoke.

Workplace harassment is slowly being recognized as a medical health issue by other jurisdictions.

**Ideas and Suggestions**

- Clean, safe school and work environments are important.
- People are suffering from asbestos-caused diseases; Canada should ban this substance.
- The Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS) and the Hazardous Products laws are a good start but need to be expanded to include pesticides.
- Improve sanitization practices for staff and increase supervision.
- Create legislation regarding bullying in the workplace.
• Provide effective and immediate assistance to employees suffering from illnesses resulting from being bullied.

• There needs to be more attention given to common sense safety issues (better signage, more information).

• There appears to be no provision in collective agreements for sick leave when a person is a victim of workplace violence.

• Improve the working conditions of health professionals (less overtime and fewer split shifts).

• Look to Sweden: they purify the air in their factories.

• Outlaw smoking in front of the main entrances at hospitals in British Columbia.

• Every employer who has more than 20 workers on a work-site should have a safety committee and conduct regular inspections.

• First aid kits should be mandatory in cars and in workplaces. Fire extinguishers and glass hammers should also be compulsory in vehicles.

• British Columbia should look at the emergency rooms in the United States; there, they are sealed and locked so nobody gets in unless the staff lets them in.

**Prevention and Health Promotion**

**Comments and Concerns**

• When communication is lacking there is an added occupational health and safety risk for health professionals.

• Currently, employers have to pay for health authority staff to talk to their employees about subjects such as nutrition, diabetes and heart health. This may be a financial burden for many employers.

• The Prevention and Early Active Return-to-Work Safely (PEARS) program is under-funded and is only available in a few hospitals.

• Our approach to ActNow BC is engaging others.
Ideas and Suggestions

- Provide workplace wellness programs which provide great benefits on many levels.
- A focus on workplace wellness can increase productivity levels. This would positively affect the economy while improving the overall quality of workers' lives.
- For every dollar invested in comprehensive prevention and health promotion programs, companies save money in the form of reduced health costs and gains in productivity.
- Comprehensive health programming for businesses includes health promotion and assistance interventions; recognition of workers’ needs, preferences, and attitudes; recognition of lifestyle behaviours; consideration of the different environments in which programs operate; and, support the development of a strong health policy in the workplace.
- Provide employees and employers with healthier options, such as exercise facilities and healthy food choices.
- Provide employers with resources, such as the BC Health Guide, to distribute and promote to their employees.
- Offer free health workshops to employers, facilitated by health professionals.
- Post the locations of clinics in first aid rooms at work.
- Increase funding for massage therapy. Massage is a safe, drug-free form of treatment for pain and stress management.
- Implement workplace inspections, including testing air quality, assessing ergonomics and access to nutritious meals.
- Change the number of hours people work during holidays.

Administration

Comments and Concerns

- Some people fall through the cracks because everyone assumes that others, such as employers, WorkSafe BC, Public Health, or unions, are going to take care of workplace safety.
- WorkSafe BC focuses on industrial workers and manual labourers and does not assist employees in other areas.
- Hygiene standards for industrial disease are not applied consistently or extensively.
• WorkSafe BC regulations can conflict with collective agreements in some cases and cannot be enforced for that reason.
• The WorkSafe BC non-smoking regulations should not have been rescinded.
• To fully plan, implement and evaluate healthy workplace programs takes a 2-5 year time span.
• Workplace safety boil water advisories are not good enough for people with compromised immune systems since they can get ill just from coming in contact with contaminated water.

**Ideas and Suggestions**

• There must be an independent investigator to examine complaints about workplace safety.
• Safety concerns not addressed by the employer should be reported to WorkSafe BC.
• Regulations should be changed to make it mandatory for WorkSafe BC to deal with safety concerns reported by employees and not addressed by the employer.
• If WorkSafe BC does not succeed in addressing safety concerns, these concerns should be settled by the courts.