Canadians Adopt Strong Reproductive Health Policy Statement

Council on Status of Women urges sweeping legal reforms

One of the strongest policy recommendations on reproductive health hazards in the workplace to be issued by any government agency was adopted in June by the Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women.

The statement contains sweeping recommendations to the Canadian government for legislation and regulatory action to safeguard the reproductive health and safety of both women and men workers. WOHRC executive director Dr. Jeanne Stellman and board member Freda Paltiel were consultants to the commission in the preparation of the statement. Ms. Paltiel is a senior advisor on status of women issues to the Canadian Department of Health and Welfare.

"In preparing the statement we were concerned with two major issues," explained Julianne Reid, director of the CACSW. "Increasing numbers of women are entering the workforce and are subject to reproductive hazards, and at the same time, those hazards are being used as an excuse to bar them from many jobs. We are trying to tackle the problem on both fronts."

The CACSW statement recommends that the federal government designate one central department or agency to develop policies and set standards and regulations for the entire country. At present, responsibility for occupational health and safety legislation is divided among the several provinces and territories. The Canadian Center for Occupational Health and Safety, created on a national basis in 1978, is empowered to give only information and advice.

The CACSW noted that a 1977 report by the Canadian Department of Health

Unhappy Ending

A sad and ironic ending has come to light in the case of the five women who had themselves sterilized to keep their jobs at the American Cyanamid plant in Willow Island, West Virginia, in October 1978.

Last fall, just a year after their revelation shocked the country, American Cyanamid announced that it was shutting down the section in which they worked. Since then, all have been transferred to other departments with complete loss of the departmental seniority and pay for which they had sacrificed so much.

"If they had not had so much seniority in their original department they would have been fired altogether," explained Joan Bertin of the American Civil Liberties Union who is representing four of them in a suit for damages. "As it is, they have been 'bumped down' to the lowest level in their new departments. They would not have needed to be sterilized to work where they are now."

The women were sterilized because of a company policy requiring female employees at Willow Island and other plants to present proof of nonfertility in order to continue working in the lead pigment section. The five chose the surgery to protect the high pay grades for which they had worked for many years. All nonsterile women in the department were transferred and demoted after the policy went into effect.

The ACLU suit is asking that American Cyanamid give the four back pay for any amount they lost while undergoing surgery, that the company pay for examinations to see whether the sterilization is reversible, and if so, to pay for reversing it. It is also seeking damages of no less than $10,000 per person.
Video Display Terminals
Better design and planning can help prevent eye strain

Perhaps not since the typewriter has a machine changed office work as much as the video display terminal. VDTs (sometimes called CRTs for cathode-ray tubes) are the television-like screens that display information stored by computers to workers in a wide variety of jobs, from newspaper reporters to airline reservation clerks.

More than three million of the machines are now in use, and another four million will be by 1984. Most are being incorporated into the existing workplace without adequate design considerations or attention to the health needs of the workers who use them. What may be good lighting design for a paper-handling job may be inadequate or even bad for a VDT operator.

The government has not yet set standards to protect these workers, but at the request of many trade unions, NIOSH (the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health) has begun research that should lead to some.

The symptoms

The most common complaints among VDT operators are:
• Eyestrain, with such symptoms as soreness, redness, stinging, itching, and general discomfort;
• Pains in the neck and back;
• Dull headaches;
• Blurred vision;
• Dizziness and nausea;
• Problems with eyeglasses and contact lenses;
• A general feeling of tension and irritability.

Eye fatigue

Eyestrain is uncomfortable and annoying; daily eyestrain may cause temporary deterioration of vision. A feeling of eyestrain often results from fatigue of the muscles that control the movements of the eye and those that regulate the amount of light that is allowed to enter. Viewing at close range for long periods of time can be particularly tiring.

VDT operators should take periodic rest breaks in open areas away from their machines.

During the breaks, it is a good idea to do simple body and eye exercises. Most important, however, is giving the eyes an opportunity to view at greater distances.

Another ideal situation is to alternate an hour of screen work with an hour of another kind of work that allows viewing from a greater distance, as well as more body movement.

Glare

Eyestrain is also caused by glare on the VDT screen resulting from light reflected from windows and shiny surfaces, or from office lighting that is too bright or badly positioned. The glare makes it difficult for the eyes to see the information on the screen. It may also cause neck and back pains if the operator contorts her body to avoid the glare.

The best remedy for glare is a screen made of nonreflective glass. Glare can also be prevented by installing blinds or awnings on nearby windows, relocating machines for better light exposure, relocating lighting fixtures, installation of indirect lighting or reducing lighting without making it difficult to read printed copy.

Contrast glare

Eyestrain may also be caused by viewing a screen against a background that is too bright, such as a white wall or a window. The pupils, which control the total light entering the eyes, adjust to the bright background rather than to
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Correct posture: Screen should be situated so that eyes look slightly downward.

Detached keyboard allows operator to adjust screen for maximum viewing comfort.
Government Studies
Two Widely Used Chemicals

Two chemicals widely used by women workers were under scrutiny by federal officials this spring. They are ethylene oxide, a sterilizing gas commonly used by health workers, which has been shown to cause chromosomal abnormalities, and formaldehyde, used in a wide variety of manufacturing and health occupations, which has caused cancer in rats and has been associated with human leukemia in several preliminary studies.

The dangers of Eto

The dangers of ethylene oxide (Eto) were brought to the attention of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration and other agencies earlier this year by the American Hospital Supply Corporation of Evanston, Illinois. Tests for AHSC by a private consultant found that 12 out of 75 of its workers had developed a chromosomal abnormality called quadriradial which affects white blood cells. The exposure rate allowed by the company was already lower than that set by OSHA, which is 50 parts per million. AHSC has further lowered its exposure limit to 10 ppm, has relocated 12 workers and is providing respiratory equipment to those working with the gas. OSHA is weighing the need for a hazard alert.

District 1199, National Union of Health and Hospital Employees, and WOHRC executive director Stelman are currently engaged in a major epidemiological-environmental study of Eto and its possible leukemogenic effects.

More than 100,000 health care workers are exposed annually to ethylene oxide, making them the largest definable group at danger. However, Eto is used for sterilizing a broad spectrum of materials, including books, foodstuffs, medical equipment, and clothing. It is also used in the manufacture of pesticides and antifreeze, where one of its elements is present in gasohol.

Special panel on formaldehyde

A special federal panel was formed in April to study formaldehyde after preliminary findings by the Chemical Industry Institute of Toxicology indicated that inhalation of 15 ppm of the chemical caused carcinomas of the nasal cavities of rats. These findings were confirmed in an independent study by six government pathologists.

The present OSHA standard for formaldehyde is an average of 3 ppm over an eight-hour workday. The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health recommends a limit of only 1 ppm because of reports of irritation, objectionable odor, and disturbed sleep after exposure at 0.3 ppm, as well as generalized complaints at concentrations above 1 ppm. The National Academy of Sciences also recently called for "the lowest possible practical" level of formaldehyde concentration after a number of studies, including one on rubber workers that showed an excess of chest tightness, cough, and eye and nose irritation.

Formaldehyde is used by a long list of workers, including laboratory workers, biology teachers, anatomists, textile printers, wood preservers, and makers of deodorants, disinfectants, embalming fluid, formal resin, hide preserves, latex, and photographic films. Many of these are women.

The newly formed government panel will look into all aspects of the health effects of formaldehyde. Members come from seven government agencies, including NIOSH, OSHA, the National Cancer Institute, the Food and Drug Administration, the Environmental Protection Agency, the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, and the National Center for Toxicological Research.

Unless you are a subscriber, this will be your last issue of the WOHRC newsletter. To subscribe please see the information on page 6.

The Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women will hold a symposium in Toronto November 14 to 16. Researchers and policymakers from both federal and provincial governments will discuss issues of concern to women, including occupational health and safety.

For more information: CRIA, Suite 415, 151 Slater St., Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1P5H3, Attention: Prof. Norma Bowen.

25 waivers in 1979

In 1979, after regulations had been published, 25 waivers were issued. State Departments of Labor in Washington and Oregon estimated that approximately 4,000 ten- and 11-year-olds were involved during that year. Employment of the children has since been halted by an injunction secured by the National Association of Farmworkers Organizations.

NAFO counters growers’ claims that danger to the children is nonexistent or minimal since the strawberry season is only about two weeks long, and almost all berries in the region are traditionally been harvested by hand by local youths, 90 percent under the age of 16.

Other berries are also hand-harvested by youngsters throughout the summer, say the farmworkers. They and other opponents of the waivers claim there are no scientific data to establish any safe period in which children may reenter pesticide-treated fields. An expert for the Environmental Protection Agency who appeared at Labor Department hearings in 1978 testified: “We don’t know the effects of occupational exposures to a variety of pesticides, both what are applied and what are still hanging around from the past.” Even the standards developed for adults were then under review, said the witness, Dr. John Davies, chairman of the Department of Epidemiology and Public Health at the University of Miami School of Medicine. “So I think it is...continued on page 6
New OSHA Standard Gives Workers Access to Medical Records

Workers and their representatives will have access to employer-maintained medical and toxic exposure records under a new standard announced May 21 by the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration. The regulation, which gives the same access to OSHA, was called by its director, Eula Bingham, "the most important produced by OSHA since I have been in office."

AFL-CIO sues

However, two hours after the standard's release, the AFL-CIO sued OSHA in the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia, seeking a full judicial review. George H. R. Taylor, AFL-CIO director of occupational health, explained that the suit was based on OSHA's failure to include two provisions that the union had requested in prior public hearings on the standard. Both would have given unions with legitimate interests authority to secure personal medical records without workers' written consent.

"Otherwise, we applaud the regulations as a commendable forward step in helping the worker cope with the occupational health hazards he faces on the job," Taylor told the Occupational Health and Safety Letter, a Washington-based publication.

The new standard, effective August 21, permits each worker, as well as representatives who have received written consent, to examine and copy an employer's records of exposure to toxic materials, personal medical records, and analyses based on these records. Access must be provided no later than 15 days after a request. Collective bargaining agents are assured access to exposure records and analyses based on these and medical records, but can receive personal medical files only with the written consent of the individual employee.

What standard covers

The exposure records covered by the standard include environmental and certain biological monitoring information, such as blood and urine samples, as well as data sheets showing the safety of materials shipped. Medical records would include medical histories, examination and test results by company doctors, physicians' opinions and diagnoses, descriptions of treatments, and prescriptions and employee medical complaints. Employers are required to keep exposure records and data analyses for 30 years, and medical records for the duration of employment plus 30 years.

In announcing the standard, OSHA emphasized the importance it places on protecting workers' privacy. It said that "strict administrative regulations" would govern how and when OSHA itself would seek access to medical records with personally identifiable information, who can use this information and for what purposes, and how the agency will safeguard it.

The AFL-CIO has asked that authority be given a union physician or epidemiologist conducting an investigation in a plant to obtain personal medical records of affected employees without their consent for the purpose of the investigation. The labor federation also seeks authority for a union with a legitimate interest to obtain medical records from a company with personal identifiers removed.

Almost all employers in general industry, construction, and maritime work are covered by the new standard. Agricultural workers would be included under an additional proposal published by OSHA on May 23.

The standard was adopted after a year of hearings in three cities across the country.

Child Berry Pickers Exposed to Pesticides

In spite of continuing controversy over the dangers of pesticides, 10- and 11-year-old children were employed to harvest pesticide-treated berries in Washington and Oregon in 1978 and 1979, an assistant secretary of labor told a House subcommittee in May.

The children's employment was the result of a controversial amendment to
the darker screen. Images on the screen become difficult to see. Some operators compensate for this by putting their heads down to block the light and raising their eyes to see the screen. This can cause back and neck aches. Another poor solution is the use of sunglasses.

The best solutions are dimming the lights, changing the location of the machine, painting or covering the facing wall in a color or texture that reflects less light, and installing a simple partition or screen behind the machine.

Screen size and color

The size of the screen is of great importance to the viewer’s comfort. It is best to have a large screen with a viewing distance of more than two feet and a character height of at least 3/16 of an inch.

Research has not yet established the best colors for screens and characters, and different operators show different preferences. However, the colors generally recommended are a dark green screen with lighter green or yellow characters, or a black screen with white characters.

Posture

Sitting in a fixed position for a long time is tiring and may cause muscle strain. This is particularly true of VDT operators, who hold a constant head and neck as well as eye position. However, some postures are less fatiguing than others.

The most comfortable viewing position is with the eyes looking slightly downward. Therefore, the height and angle of the screen should be adjustable to accommodate operators’ different heights and preferred angles of viewing.

Ideal is a machine with a detached keyboard and a fully adjustable stand. The detached keyboard enables the operator to move the screen or to raise or tilt it without changing the keyboard position.

Like other sedentary workers, VDT operators should also be concerned with the chairs they use. Sitting on poorly designed furniture may lead to back problems, varicose veins, and hemorrhoids. Care should be taken to avoid sitting with the spine curved backward.

Machine maintenance

VDTs should be checked at least twice a year, with periodic replacement of tubes. A full record of the machine maintenance should be kept and should be available to workers.

Eyeglasses and contact lenses

Workers who wear corrective lenses often have additional difficulty in using VDTs, and should inform their eye doctors that they work with them. It may be necessary for such workers to be fitted with special lenses designed to focus at the normal viewing distance from eyes to screen.

Stress

In addition to eyestrain and postural problems, VDT operators are subject to many of the stressful conditions common to all office work: noise, pressure, overcrowded work spaces, and uninteresting work. One researcher has found that as the machines proliferate their operators sometimes become even more alienated from their jobs than assembly-line workers—another good reason that employees should strive for variety in the workday.

Heat from the machines and their bad positioning in overcrowded offices can also cause stress. Especially to be avoided is the seating of a worker with her back too close to the back of another machine, or the arrangement of workers in clusters facing each other.

Stress may also arise from the intense concentration often required in working with VDTs. Pauses while the operator waits for information to appear on the screen are not restful, but often particularly stressful.

Much of the material above has been adapted from the pamphlet Health Protection for Operators of VDTs/CRTs published by the New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health. Copies of the pamphlet are available for 50 cents each from: NYCOSH, Box 3285, Grand Central Station, New York, N.Y. 10017.

WOHRC is currently doing research on optimum working conditions for VDT operators, and has designed survey forms which can help you to evaluate your workplace. For copies of the forms write to WOHRC, School of Public Health, Columbia University, 60 Haven Avenue, B-1, New York, N.Y. 10032.
Canada continued from page 1
and Welfare states that "each year, at least 200 new health problems arise, all unknown the year before, and most of these are associated, unwittingly and unwillingly, with the work environment. The chemical industry, for example, introduces about 3,000 new products into the world’s manufacturing processes each year and the majority of these products are not tested for adverse effects on human health until a crisis situation arises."

Single standard recommended

The agency recommended that the government (a) "establish a single standard for each hazard which would ensure maximum protection for the most susceptible worker of any age or either sex;
(b) ensure that laboratory or other testing of all new substances or processes include screening for teratogenicity (ability to harm the fetus after conception), mutagenicity, carcinogenicity, and evidence of effects on lactation before introducing them into the workplace;
(c) be measurable, understandable and capable of general enforcement."

In situations of clearly identifiable reproductive hazards, the CACSW urged that workers, both male and female, be granted the right "to refuse work and to leave the hazardous work area immediately without loss of income or job security."

Other sections of the Canadian statement called for strong measures to protect workers against known hazards, promote the training of occupational health professionals, and appropriate funds for research and dissemination of information on occupational health. Copies of the statement are available from WOHRC.

It's All "Natural"

Intrigued by a typewriter correction fluid called "Natural Dry," sent to WOHRC executive director Dr. Jeanne Stellman by Working Women director Karen Nussbaum, Stellman recently wrote to its manufacturer, Witeout Products, Inc., of Beltsville, Maryland, to ask what the "natural" ingredients are.

The reply: "The term ‘natural’ refers to the product’s drying; i.e., it dries naturally by air evaporation.

"The term ‘natural dry’ does not attempt to make application to the product’s ingredients,“ explained the letter from the company’s vice-president of marketing. "However the product’s base is water, and we would consider that this is an element considered to be ‘natural.’ I am sorry that we must consider it to be in our best business interest to not divulge its entire formulation."

If you are concerned about chemicals used in your workplace, send WOHRC a copy of the label, the trade name, and the manufacturer, and we’ll do our best to investigate.

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premature to put a person into this ecosystem whose hormones and gonads are developing."

Threat to child labor laws

NAFO says it is also concerned that the growers are attempting to chip away at child labor and environmental laws. The organization cites a bill recently introduced into Congress by Representative Mike McCormack of Washington that would eliminate the requirement that 10- and 11-year-olds be allowed to work only after school hours. A bill by two other Washington representatives would put the burden of proof on federal agencies, rather than on the growers, in proving that individual pesticides are harmful.

The Labor Department has since hired a private consulting firm to study pesticide hazards, and this spring invited public comment for new regulations affecting the employment of 10- and 11-year-olds. A long-term study is also under way.

If the court has its way, however, it is unlikely that any more waivers will be issued. In its injunction in the farmworkers suit, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia held that there must be proof of "absolute safety" or "zero risk" before a waiver can be issued. Secretary Elsiburg told the House subcommittee, "Our contacts with the scientific community indicate that it is unlikely that such a test can ever be met."

Columbia University
WOMEN'S OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH
RESOURCE CENTER
School of Public Health
60 Haven Avenue, B-1
New York, New York 10032
Telephone: (212) 694-3464

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