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FAST FACTS

April 27, 2011

Remember the Canary! Stop the public health epidemic in our workplaces

Ever look at work going on around you? The computer set-ups? The tools and equipment? How much people are expected to lift and how often? Ever consider how few studies there are about most products or chemicals we use?

More and more Manitobans have family, friends and neighbours with a disease, injury or illness caused, or affected, by their work.

A few have friends or family killed outright on the job. Death on the job is obvious. Connections between our jobs and our health aren't so visible. We're not taught to draw lines between what we're doing now and the consequences in 20 years, or to link jobs we've had to the current state of our bodies and minds. Some assume "it's part of the job" or their genes are responsible (e.g., for high blood pressure), when it's not true.

Too often, official statistics are the topic of public stories. Based on compensation boards' accepted claims, they aren't the whole picture. Not everyone's covered, or makes a claim; not all legitimate claims are accepted. Still, the picture's pretty scary:

- Statistics Canada estimates that 630,000 Canadians had at least one acute "activity-limiting" work-related injury in 2003. Adding "repetitive strain injuries", and other work-related diseases and illnesses at least doubles the number.

- In 2003, Canadian compensation boards accepted about 348,000 claims for injuries, illnesses and diseases where people lost time at work, or died because of their work. The difference between what is reported, what boards accept and what should be counted, is a long-standing unresolved issue.

- In 1994, a Winnipeg doctor estimated there were between 77,900 and 112,000 new cases of occupational diseases and 2,381 to 6,010 job-related disease deaths each year in Canada. Using his conservative estimates, about 1.8 million Canadians have had a work-related disease since 1994. More than 96,000 died of it.

- The Manitoba Board accepted 31,730 claims in 2009. Two things stand out about them:

- » Musculoskeletal injuries (MSIs) - the bad backs, "repetitive strain injuries" and other results of poor design - were almost 62 percent of all lost-time injuries.

- » Women older than 35 have higher rates than younger women; it's been that way for 10 years however older women get almost no attention.

Laws help. After 26 Westray miners were killed in 1992, unions pushed for federal Bill C-45; now it's easier to use the Criminal Code for health and safety charges. Like public health specialists,



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the unions also have called for more and better enforcement of laws, more rights for workers and communities, and more prosecutions for deaths and serious injuries.

In Manitoba, the NDP government has increased the number of inspections, inspectors, fines and prosecutions (almost all for safety hazards). It has a special prosecutor for health and safety crimes. 37,000 more workers now have workers' compensation coverage. There is a new law to prevent workplace bullying and psychological harassment. Joint health and safety committees now must inspect workplaces.

Government actions matter. A recent U.S. study found that regulations don't cost jobs overall, and may help create new ones. Other studies say that inspections, programmes and training are useful, but enforcement (charges and fines) is the best tool for workplaces healthier and safer.

There's still an elephant in the room. In a 2005 Canadian study, employers said that occupational injuries and "accidents" cannot be prevented, are tolerable and inevitable and caused by careless or inattentive workers.

This flies in the face of evidence. Workplace hazards cause job-related illnesses, injuries and deaths. Laws say employers must deal with them to prevent employees getting hurt, sick or killed. Studies say they can do it.

Yet "behaviour-based safety" programmes effectively bully workers into blaming themselves when someone is hurt or gets sick. They stop discussion about real hazards and how to prevent them.

April 28th is a day to recognise workers killed, injured and made ill by their work. The Canadian creation, and its canary symbol, presents a time to start public conversations about better ways to deal with this public health epidemic, such as:

- Call it that - an epidemic - at every opportunity.

- Green jobs that are good for the environment and the people doing them, based on the precautionary principle to avoid/reduce using hazardous methods, equipment and products.
- Demand and support development and use of:
 - » green chemistry, toxics use reduction, informed substitution, life cycle thinking, and extended producer responsibility (see cleanproduction.org)
 - » databases with practical solutions, particularly for ergonomic and stress hazards (e.g., croetweb.com/links.cfm?topicID=55)
- Health and safety programmes that include a complete costing of hazards (to compare with the costs of "fixes") that are enforced using the law's "reasonably practicable" criteria (see safemanitoba.com/new_eyes.aspx)
- Supplement government enforcement with "roving reps" that inspect other workplaces (done in Scandinavia) and union inspection notices from trained reps (Australian law).
- More charges, especially about health hazards and their effects. Make this more likely with more and better training of police officers, crown attorneys, inspectors and health and safety committees.
- Public events to recognise any worker who dies because of their job and how work affects women, the young, workers of colour and Aboriginal workers.
- Use vocabulary that better describes reality and reinforces the prevention goals:

- » *hazards*, not risks
- » *prevention*, not controls
- » *incidents*, not accidents
- » *root causes and systems thinking*, not behaviour-based safety; and
- » *health*, not just safety.

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