



National Occupational Health
and Safety Advisory Committee
Komiti Tūhūtuhu Mahi Ā-Motu Hauora me te Haumaru

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Surveillance and Control of Workplace Exposures in New Zealand

New report recommends system for reducing workplace diseases and injuries

A new report stresses the importance of an effective 'surveillance system' for improving New Zealand's performance in preventing work-related diseases and injuries.

Commissioned by the National Occupational Health and Safety Advisory Committee (NOHSAC), the report states that the overriding goal of any workplace health and safety system is to prevent occupational diseases and injuries. This reflects the fact that, in New Zealand each year, 700 to 1,000 people die from work-related diseases, 100 people die from injuries received at work, there are 20,000 new cases of work-related diseases and injuries, and 200,000 people are injured at work.

"This is a huge and unacceptable burden for New Zealand, and we must act to address it," says NOHSAC Chair Professor Neil Pearce. "Surveillance – that is, collecting, analysing and interpreting data and using it for preventive and control purposes – is an important first step."

The new report builds on and complements a previous NOHSAC report, *Surveillance of occupational disease and injury in New Zealand*, which recommended a major emphasis on measuring workplace diseases and injuries. The report suggested that this surveillance be integrated with 'exposure surveillance' and 'exposure control system surveillance' – with the term 'exposure' relating to hazards and risk factors such as environmental, technological, organisational, human and other factors that contribute to occupational injury and disease.

"While it's vital that we have a system to record the number of work-related deaths and cases of work-related diseases and injuries in New Zealand, this doesn't really address their causes," says Professor Neil Pearce. "Identifying and acting on the workplace exposures and hazards behind these diseases and injuries, as well as the controls in place, is just as important.

"Unfortunately, as the report reveals, New Zealand lacks any system for collecting workforce or workplace exposure data. This means we can't undertake accurate risk assessments for workplace diseases, develop effective prevention policies and activities, evaluate the effectiveness of interventions or identify occupational safety

and health trends. We also can't identify businesses' awareness of, and compliance with, their legal requirements.

"We must make a commitment to correcting this situation, drawing on the lessons of existing system operators and building approaches that are consistent with current knowledge and practice."

The new report focuses mainly on exposure surveillance and, through an extensive literature research, identifies a number of examples of international best practice that could be used as the basis for a New Zealand system.

"We know that implementing our own system will take some time, but in the meantime we can make an excellent start by obtaining baseline data through regular employer/employee surveys based on a random sample of the population," says Professor Pearce. "These could be supplemented by workplace-specific surveys focusing on particular exposures – and we could also develop joint exposure surveillance initiatives with Australia, given that we share a number of exposures."

The report states that exposure surveillance can make a major contribution to reducing the burden of work-related diseases and injury. It can be used to:

- identify trends in occupational health and safety and changes over time
- identify awareness of, and compliance with, legal requirements
- develop accurate assessments of risks in the workplace
- target and support prevention activities and help in developing preventive policies
- evaluate the effect or the efficiency of interventions or occupational health and safety management
- enable preventive action earlier than is usually possible when monitoring outcomes. This is particularly true when there is a long latency period between exposure and the occurrence of the resulting disorder, as is the case with many work-related diseases such as occupational cancer
- achieve more in disease and injury prevention that could be accomplished with disease and injury surveillance alone.

"These benefits highlight not only the value but the importance of an exposure surveillance system," says Professor Pearce. "Workplace diseases and injuries have a huge impact on New Zealand – for the individuals and their families and employers, for the wider community and for New Zealand's economy. It's time we realised that we have the capability to improve our performance in this area, and act in the best interests of New Zealand and New Zealanders."

For more information, and a copy of *Surveillance and control of workplace exposures in New Zealand*, contact:

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The report will also be available on the NOHSAC website at www.nohsac.govt.nz.

