



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

News Release

Telephone: 64 4 915 4463

Facsimile: 64 4 915 4329

Mobile: 027 660 7807

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FROM: Mark Wagstaffe

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The burden of occupational disease and injury in New Zealand

A report released today by the National Occupational Health and Safety Advisory Committee (NOHSAC) reports that the toll of work-related disease and injury is much higher than has previously been believed.

Chair of the Committee, Professor Neil Pearce, from Massey University's Centre for Public Health Research, notes that it is well known that there are about 100 deaths each year from occupational injury. "What is not so well known is that there are also 700 to 1000 deaths each year from occupational disease," says Professor Pearce. "There are also about 17,000-20,000 new cases of work-related disease and about 200,000 occupational accidents resulting in successful ACC claims."

"These deaths and injuries cost New Zealand somewhere between \$4.3 billion and \$8.7 billion each year. Employers bear about 40% of this cost, injured workers bear about 30%, and the community bears about 30%."

"The major causes of deaths from occupational disease include occupational cancer and respiratory disease. Musculoskeletal disease and workplace fatigue are also of particular concern."

Professor Pearce stressed that the numbers presented in the report were estimates, based on a combination of overseas data and New Zealand data. "We don't know what the true figures are, because the New Zealand data is inadequate, but these are our best guesses based on the information we have available."

Professor Pearce says that "it would be considered unacceptable if the Ministry of Transport did not know how many New Zealanders were dying or being seriously injured on the roads, or the main causes and circumstances of the deaths and serious injury, and therefore had no effective strategies to reduce the death and injury rate. Why is such a situation acceptable for deaths in the workplace?"

"The Department of Labour and other government agencies do not know how many people die from work-related causes each year. More than 80% of work-

related deaths (most due to disease rather than injury) are not documented or reported, and are not investigated.”

The Committee was established in 2003 and its role is to provide the Minister of Labour with independent, contestable advice on major occupational health and safety issues. The other members include Dr Evan Dryson (Occupational Medicine Specialist), Dr Anne-Marie Feyer (University of Otago), Professor Philippa Gander (Massey University) and Mr Selwyn McCracken (University of Otago).

The report concludes that it is essential that a single agency, such as OSH, takes the lead in, and ultimate responsibility for, occupational health and safety, rather than this task being handled by a variety of agencies for which occupational health and safety is a secondary responsibility. It stressed that an increased emphasis on occupational health should not be at the expense of reducing the current activities undertaken by OSH with regards to preventing occupational injury.

“A concentrated effort must be made to reduce the toll of work-related deaths, as is currently done for deaths on the road.”

Professor Neil Pearce
Centre for Public Health Research,
Massey University, Wellington
tel 04-380-0606