

Media Statement

What we don't know about occupational injuries and illnesses

Although many people die from work-related diseases or accidents each year, we need better information on the number of deaths, what the causes are, and what can be done about preventing them.

Getting that information will be the first priority for the National Occupational Health and Safety Advisory Committee (NOHSAC), an independent Committee established by the Minister of Labour earlier this year. It will first develop a report on the burden of occupational disease and injury in New Zealand. It then plans to research occupational disease monitoring systems, emerging occupational health and safety hazards, and the effects of recent changes in the work environment.

"While there is some information about the number of deaths due to workplace injuries each year, we know much less about the number of deaths from occupationally-related diseases, and even less about cancer registrations or hospital admissions caused by occupational exposures", says NOHSAC Chair, Professor Neil Pearce.

Also the problem with occupationally-related disease is that it can and frequently does take considerable periods of time for the adverse health effects associated with continuing exposure to hazards to become apparent. For occupational cancer, it can take 25 to 30 years for the cancer to develop and for the symptoms of cancer to show, says Dr Pearce.

Without this research agenda, New Zealand has little or no chance of effectively monitoring the burden of occupational disease and injury in New Zealand, or of developing and evaluating effective interventions to reduce this burden, Professor Pearce says.

To identify the huge gaps in our knowledge of occupational disease and injury, NOHSAC is preparing a report on the major occupational health and injury problems and their causes. The research will clarify the size of the problem of fatal and non-fatal disease and injury arising from work-related exposures in New Zealand. The Committee will also produce recommendations for reducing the future burden of occupational disease and injury. The work will be completed by mid 2004.

This work programme will serve as a solid platform upon which NOHSAC can advise the government on policy initiatives, prevention programmes, and further research into occupational health and safety in New Zealand.

"At the moment, we don't even know how much we don't know," says Professor Pearce. "this research will tell us where the information gaps are, and then we can work out what to do about them."

For further information:

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