

Cancer Where You Work

Simple arithmetic tells a grim story of work-related cancers. As Canadian labor leader Larry Stoffman said, “No single number is going to provide an accurate estimate of risks from so many hazardous substances linked to dozens of different types of cancer across all occupations.”¹ However, a realistic calculation puts the number of Canadians and Americans dying from work-related cancers between 60,000 to 80,000 every year.

Nearly all are preventable.



Dr. Keogh's Family

Dr. James P. Keogh was a tireless advocate for worker health and safety in the US who exposed cases of asbestosis and lung cancer in steel and construction workers. He died from liver cancer in June 1999, at the age of 49.

If you poison your boss a little each day it's called murder; if your boss poisons you a little each day, it's called Threshold Limit Value.

— James P. Keogh, MD

Workers in at least 60 occupations have higher death rates from cancer than the general population. “The auto industry is producing laryngeal, stomach and colorectal cancers along with its cars. Aluminum smelter workers are contracting bladder cancer. Firefighters contract brain and blood-related cancers at many times the expected levels. Women in the plastics industry are at greater risk for uterine and possibly breast cancer,” according to the Canadian Labour Congress. The list goes on and on. Blue-collar workers bear the brunt, but many others, such as chemotherapy nurses, chemists and dentists, also experience higher rates of cancer.

Identifying cancers linked to workplaces is over 200 years old. In 1775 the British physician Sir Percivall Pott reported that chimney sweeps suffered an excess of scrotal cancers from their continual exposure to soot and coal tar. In 1879 two German physicians identified “mountain sickness” afflicting silver and uranium miners as lung cancer. As the industrial revolution gathered steam, so did work-related cancers.

In 2007 workers still operate at the front lines of exposure to carcinogens with little concern for their well-being. “Who cares?” asked Dr. Peter Infante in 1995. “Blue-collar workers appear to be the canaries in our society for identifying human chemical carcinogens in the general environment.”² Aside from tobacco, 21 of 22 chemicals recognized as lung carcinogens by the International Agency for Research on Cancer were first identified in the workplace.

The Louisville Charter for Safer Chemicals pointed out that 26 million chemicals and

- *Hazards Magazine*: www.hazards.org
- Louisville Charter for Safer Chemicals, *Take Immediate Action to Protect Communities and Workers*: www.louisvillecharter.org

chemical compounds registered with the Chemical Abstract Service have been assigned a number. Our creativity in the laboratory knows no bounds. Some 100,000 synthetic chemicals are used commercially, but only about 500 chemicals have legally enforceable worker exposure limits, many which are well above the levels known to cause harm.³ Nuclear workers also have a higher risk of cancer from job-related ionizing radiation.

Rory O'Neill of *Hazards Magazine* charges governments and regulators with careless indifference: "While smoking cessation has become a major public health priority and has spurred an entire prevention industry, no similar campaign has been waged to address the carcinogens encountered and inhaled by millions at work. Primary prevention — removing the risks — could prevent all occupational cancers."⁴

"'Not enough evidence of cancer risk' has been used by governments to evade their obligation for worker safety. This is often a red herring," said Larry Stoffman. "We refuse to collect data on occupational exposures and histories, we do not monitor for environmental exposures, we do not enforce regulations, nor do we carry out much research in Canada on environmentally induced chronic disease. Not bothering to gather the evidence, we then ask, 'Where is the evidence?'"

Fettered by politics and overmatched by industry, the US Occupational Safety and Health Administration has tightened standards for only 26 of an estimated 650,000 chemicals and mixtures to which US workers are exposed. Some on

the list are known to be dangerous; others have never been studied.

Industry challenges to proposed limits, backed by industry-funded science, are the norm. They always demand proof, then more proof. Years, sometimes decades, pass.⁵

There are also major differences between the standards for workplace and environmental exposure. In California 68 chemicals that are known to cause cancer or reproductive harm are totally unregulated in state workplaces, except for non-cancer effects. Even when exposure standards are adequate, enforcement is often lax or negligent.

Peter Infante has calculated that the cancer risk among workers exposed to known International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) carcinogens is up to 12 excess cases per 1,000 workers exposed at the current exposure limits. This is 12 times higher than the "acceptable risk" as defined by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health in the US.

There is enormous work to do to defeat occupational cancer, and no shortage of solutions.

The government didn't care at Holmes Foundry that workers were exposed to thousands of times over the legal limit of asbestos. That wasn't in the equation. They didn't care at Holmes Corning. They don't care today that workers are exposed to diesel exhaust and metal working fluids, to electro-magnetic fields. They still don't care....

— Jim Brophy, in the documentary film,
Never Walk Alone