

Making WHMIS Work

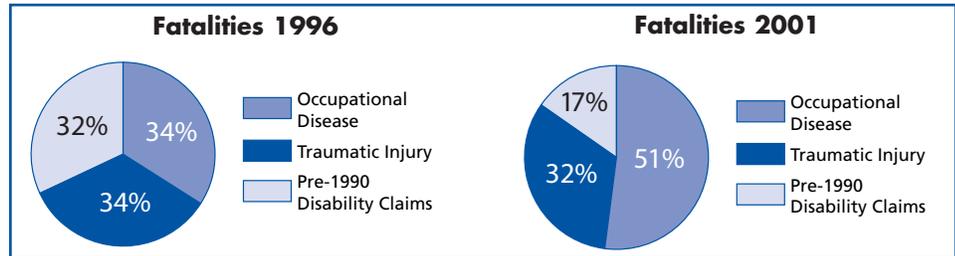
The Key is Awareness and Accountability

Almost twenty years ago the federal government came up with a plan to control exposures to hazardous chemicals in the workplace. The plan, enacted by federal legislation but implemented by the provinces, focused on the education of workers as the key to success. It is called WHMIS – Workplace Hazardous Material Information System, and it arrived in Ontario in 1984.

The essential elements of WHMIS included labeling, warning symbols, up-to-date information on the hazards posed by the chemical, and an education program to ensure workers understand what they are reading. Training is mandatory in most workplaces, and it became a priority for Ministry of Labour inspectors in Ontario in the late '80s.

Today it remains the only nationwide regulated means of ensuring that workers know about the hazards of the substances in their workplaces. It is once again a priority with the Ministry of Labour. WHMIS is mentioned several times in the Ministry's Cross Sector Targeting Strategy, under Health Hazards, the enforcement of the recently revised Occupational Exposure Limits, as well as in the sections on Temporary Workers and Young Workers. "It's understandable that some people might have become complacent. It's more than 15 years since WHMIS training was introduced," says **Audrey Birkbeck**, Provincial Program Specialist (Industrial Health) with the Ministry of Labour's Occupational Health & Safety Branch. If your workplace uses any kinds of hazardous materials, you can expect Ministry of Labour inspectors to ask about WHMIS compliance in your workplace during 2003. And you can expect orders to be written if you are not in compliance.

The goal of the WHMIS program is to prevent workers from being exposed to hazardous chemicals. Exposure to hazardous chemicals can lead to occupational illness, permanent disability or death. Data from the WSIB seems to bear this out. Much of the focus of prevention activities has been on traumatic incidents – the slips, falls and strains that have traditionally been seen as typical work-related accidents. In 1996, the number of allowed occupational disease fatalities and the number of fatalities as a result of traumatic accidents, were roughly equal, both accounting for 34%



of allowed fatalities. (The remaining 32% were related to pre-1990 100% permanent disability claims.) By 2001, while the number of traumatic fatalities accounted for 32% of the total, the number of occupational disease fatalities had increased to 51% of all allowed fatalities.

Clearly, workers are still being exposed to agents that cause occupational disease. And some of the occupational diseases are leading to work-related fatalities. That is why the Ministry of Labour has re-established WHMIS training as a priority in Ontario. "The whole system is prevention-based, to provide workers with a degree of comfort," says **Birkbeck** of the MoL.

The requirements of the WHMIS program can be found in Regulation 860, pursuant to the *Occupational Health and Safety Act of Ontario*. The requirements are easy to understand – first, employers must know if they are using hazardous materials in their workplace. If they are, there are three requirements:

- wherever that material is found in the workplace, it must be labeled, in the manner described in the regulation;
- up-to-date health and safety information on that material (referred to as Material Safety Data Sheets) must be available in the workplace, and accessible to workers; and,
- the workers must be told about the hazards associated with these materials, and they must be trained to understand the labels and the safety information available.

The actual regulations are more detailed than this, but this is an overview.

Virtually all education sector workplaces have hazardous materials, so they all come under the WHMIS regulation. You can expect to be asked about your program soon.

WHMIS is more than just a technical regulation. **Mary Cook**, General Manager of

the Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers believes that following the WHMIS regulations can actually save lives. "WHMIS encourages workers and employers to use the contents of the data sheets to improve the workplace, and make it a healthier and safer place to work." She adds, "WHMIS is not perfect – many of us believe that there is not enough emphasis on the long term health effects of many workplace chemicals. However, the current WHMIS program is the first step in the right direction. While we would like to see the regulations strengthened at some time, compliance with the existing rules will make workplaces safer and allow workers to limit their exposures."

No one expects senior administrators, or board members, in universities, colleges and large school boards to be totally familiar with their organization's WHMIS program, but here are five quick questions that your health and safety staff should have the right answers to:

- Does our organization fall under the WHMIS Regulation?
- Do we have a list of the hazardous chemicals in our workplace, where they are used and who uses them?
- Are all hazardous materials in our workplace labeled in compliance with the WHMIS regulation?
- Do we have up-to-date Material Safety Data Sheets for all hazardous materials in our workplace, and are they accessible by the workers?
- Is our WHMIS training program up to date?

While the day-to-day job of making the program work can be delegated to the appropriate staff position, senior administrators and board members have a legal obligation to ensure that the program is in place. Simply asking is the first step to meeting that obligation.