

working together for safer, healthier workplaces



Facts and figures

Occupational Health and Safety Act 2004

Introduction

The Victorian Government's overriding goal is to improve Victoria's health and safety system and prevent work-related deaths, injuries and illness, and the associated high social and economic costs.

Injuries and fatalities data

Too many Victorians continue to die, get injured or become ill at work. In 2004 29 Victorians died as a result of a work-related incident. This does not include workers who died from a work-related illness¹.

Each year more than 30,000 people lodge a WorkCover claim, indicating that they have been injured seriously enough to be entitled to workers' compensation².

The cost of workplace injury and illness to the Victorian economy has been estimated at over \$8.5 billion per year. Allowing for pain, suffering and the cost of early death, the total estimated cost jumps to \$20.7 billion³.

A one per cent reduction in the number of workplace injuries and diseases will deliver an estimated \$85 million saving to the Victorian economy every year, and a saving of \$207

million when the cost of pain, suffering and early death is factored in⁴.

Stress, workplace bullying and violence

Injuries and illness associated with stress, workplace bullying and violence have increased.

Although WorkCover claims data does not accurately represent the actual incidence of stress-related injury and illness, it is clear that the number of occupational stress claims as a percentage of total claims is increasing.

In 2003, the WorkCover Advisory Line received 2,859 calls about workplace bullying and 124 about discrimination against workers.

In the first six months of 2004, 1,496 people called about bullying, and 67 about violence in their workplaces⁵.

Workplace design

Health and safety risks are best controlled at their source. Although the Victorian Occupational Health and Safety Act 1985 recognised this principle, workers continue to be injured or killed by poorly designed plant and equipment.

¹ Victorian WorkCover Authority (VWA) data.

² VWA.

³ Based on preliminary NOSH estimates (2004).

⁴ Based on preliminary NOSH estimates (2004).

⁵ VWA.

National research shows:

- One in four workplace deaths occurred as a result of poor design
- Forty-two per cent of compensated serious workplace injuries were caused in part by poor design
- Design was a factor in half of the incidents in agriculture, construction, mining, transport and manufacturing, and
- Nearly all deaths involving machinery and fixed plant were at least partly caused by design⁶.

The biggest source of claims – Musculo-Skeletal Disorders (MSDs)

Although there have been many changes in Victorian workplaces since the introduction of the OHS Act in 1985, musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) remain the greatest single source of WorkCover claims. In the years since 1985, there have been more than 450,000 claims for MSDs. This constitutes 58 per cent of total WorkCover claims during this period⁷.

Inspections and prosecutions data

In 2003-04 WorkSafe's inspectorate made 43,719 workplace visits, and issued:

- 12,492 improvement notices
- 2,303 prohibition notices, and
- 1,233 directions⁸.

WorkSafe completed 206 prosecutions for breaches of OHS legislation⁹.

Health & Safety Representatives (HSR) data

Number of HSRs

Accurate data on the number of HSRs in Victoria is not available. However, based on the experience of other States, the number of HSRs in Victoria is estimated to be about 10,000. Victoria has approximately 2.2 million people in the workforce.

Issues identified by HSRs

A recent survey by the Victorian Trades Hall Council of 807 HSRs (94 per cent of whom were union members representing workers in predominantly large workplaces) found that:

- Only 32 per cent of HSRs are automatically consulted about workplace changes that affect health and safety and 45 per cent were always involved in the investigation of incidents
- 47 per cent said they were not provided with sufficient time or resources to perform their health and safety role
- 58 per cent stated that their designated work groups (DWGs) encompassed workers in different shifts or different locations
- Although 69 per cent were aware that a WorkSafe inspector had visited their workplace, only 36 per cent were contacted at the time by the inspector
- 25 per cent reported that they had issued a Provisional Improvement Notice (PIN) and only 17 per cent had ever issued a cease work order
- 82 per cent had completed a five-day basic training course and
- 33 per cent reported that they, or others in the workplace, had been pressured, intimidated or bullied by their employer or management as a result of raising health and safety issues¹⁰.

These results are largely consistent with results from the Victorian Occupation Health and Safety Commission survey of October 1987. Although this survey represented a wider range of industries, respondents reported similar problems, such as:

- the lack of time and resources made available to HSRs to fulfil their role
- poor employer/management awareness about the role and entitlements of HSRs and
- failure of employers to communicate with HSRs about hazards or incidents, and intimidation of HSRs.

⁶ National Occupational Health & Safety Commission, cited in the Occupational Health and Safety Act Review, Chris Maxwell QC (March 2004) pp. 178–181.

⁷ VWA. Note: this figure may not be accurate due to changes in claims data coding introduced since 1985.

⁸ VWA.

⁹ VWA.

¹⁰ Victorian Trades Hall Council, The view from the front line: A report on the experiences of OHS representatives, October 2004.