

Faculty of Occupational Medicine

Wilf Howe Memorial Prize 2006

Winning submission by Dr Jayne Moore

Identifying and addressing occupation-related skin problems on a chemical industrial site

1. Clear description of innovation, initiative or intervention

An increase in the number of people reporting skin irritation became apparent over a few months. On collecting the case histories and looking at them together (rather than individually as the cases arose) it became clear that there was an association with a particular area of manufacture. A work place visit was undertaken. Problems were noted and their possible association with the skin problems was determined. A consultant dermatologist was asked his opinion on the basis of his viewing digital photographs of affected individuals. A plan has been developed to try to remedy the site problems and therefore reduce skin problems. This is a work in progress. The interventions have been: increased awareness, by toolbox talks, of skin care in the workplace; more frequent rotation of staff into and out of the area therefore reducing duration of exposure; a programme of works to reduce steam leaks in the area to reduce exposure to the irritant; and consideration that, if an improvement is not noticed following these measures, personal protective equipment may need to be changed to air flow visors.

2. Description of working population

Male workers aged 34-50 years working in a chemical manufacturing industry.

3. Reasons for choosing 1 and 2, including organisational context

The problem arose in this specific area and therefore the investigation and intervention took place at this site.

4. How did you measure outcomes?

The health and safety manager for the area is monitoring outcomes on corrective engineering work taking place. The occupational health department is recording reported skin problems in the area.

5. What were the health benefits?

Improved well being of the workforce and a reduction in occupational dermatoses. Also some improvement in the working environment.

6. Give an account of the difficulties / obstacles that arose and how they were addressed

There was some resistance on the part of the management to accept that there may be

a work related element as the process in question has gone on for years. Additionally the area is very old and there is no money to invest in replacement of equipment in this area. Meetings were held with the various managers involved to discuss changes in the process and methods of improving the environmental conditions without a large capital outlay.

7. Explain how this might be used elsewhere

This is a response to a cluster of problems that arose. The first difficulty lies in seeing that there is a cluster arising as the individuals may present over a period of time. This being due to the exposure being limited and infrequent. Once a cluster is recognised, of whatever type of disease or condition, the process followed above should help to highlight the problem and hopefully indicate solutions.