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Theresa Nguyet Tien Nguyen

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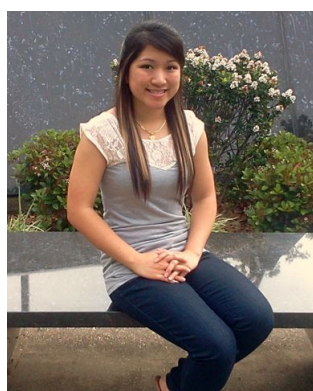
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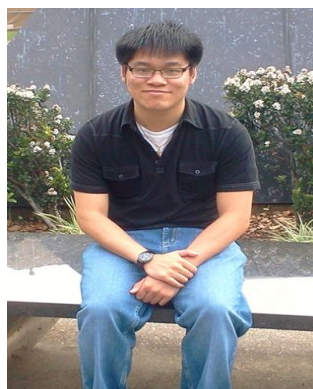


Occupational Safety and Health: The First Step Towards Reducing Disparities in Louisiana

Theresa Nguyet Tien Nguyen, Pharmacy and
Christopher Trung Vu, Pharmacy

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Margarita Echeverri, Pharmacy

Theresa Nguyet Tien Nguyen is a College of Pharmacy student from Morgan City, LA. Upon graduation in 2014, Nguyen plans to enter a residency program that addresses the disparities that exist in pharmacological medicine.



Christopher Trung Vu is a College of Pharmacy student from Harvey, LA. Upon graduation in 2014, Vu plans to pursue a residency in academia where he plans to expose inequalities and disparities within pharmacology and everyday life.

Abstract

Occupational differences in greater risk of injury, illness, or death have been recognized as important factors contributing to health disparities. As a consequence, Healthy People 2020 has included “Occupational Safety and Health” as one of the topics to focus on in the fight against health disparities. Specifically in Louisiana, reducing work-related deaths and injuries in the construction and transportation field would have an important impact in reducing occupational health disparities. Research suggests that implementing safety and training courses in construction companies and higher seatbelt usage during transportation would have an effect on decreasing work-related injuries, illnesses, and fatalities. This essay serves to utilize Healthy People 2020’s outreach of occupational safety and health in order to educate others on the prevalence of disparity that Louisiana construction and transportation workers endure on a daily basis and also to exemplify possible measures that can be taken to decrease this disparity.

Key Terms:

- Disparities
- Louisiana
- Occupational Safety and Health
- Transportation
- Construction

Introduction

The United States is often referred to as the land of justice, equality, and freedom, yet each and every day millions of people are affected by disparities. According to the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (2004), a disparity is defined as “the condition or fact of being unequal, as in age, rank, or degree.” Disparities are often linked to healthcare, but they are even present in the occupation sector. Contributing factors of occupational safety and health disparities include the type of occupation, location, workplace settings, and the rules, regulations, and organization of the occupation. Healthy People, a national initiative whose objective is to improve the health of all Americans, has recently added “Occupational Safety and Health” as a topic area of interest due to its growing impact on overall disparities. Its intent is to decrease the number of work-related diseases, injuries, and death by 2020. It suggests that each workplace analyze the safety and health risks involved in daily activities and develop and implement interventions that would improve workplace safety practices. This would result in an overall decrease or elimination of sick days, accidents, and fatalities (DHHS, 2010). One method of addressing occupational safety and health disparities is Louisiana Workers’ Compensation Corporation’s six step intervention that is elaborated later in this essay. This intervention method can be applied towards both construction and transportation fields, and results obtained from studies exemplify its effectiveness.

Statistics show that Louisiana’s work-related injuries and illnesses are at the lowest level since Occupational Safety & Health Administration (OSHA) implemented new record-keeping methods in 2002 (Louisiana Workforce Commission, 2010). Yet, of the 153,600,000 Americans employed in 2009, there was an average incident rate of 3.1 cases of injuries or

illnesses per 100 workers, which equates to 4,761,600 injuries or illnesses that year alone. In Louisiana, 2.8 incident cases per 100 people employed in the private sector were reported. With a population of 1,534,000 workers, that is equivalent to 42,952 injuries or illnesses. Of these incidents, 5,403 nonfatal injuries and illnesses occurred in the construction and transportation industry, about 13 percent of the state’s injuries (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). However, the fatal injuries are much more prevalent among construction and transportation workers. Of the 140 fatalities recorded in 2009, 62 were transportation related, 30 were equipment related, and 15 were related to falls (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). These statistics indicate that 44% of Louisiana’s work-related fatalities were due to transportation, and 32% are closely linked to construction.

Occupational safety in construction

The vast damages caused by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005 have allowed the construction industry to thrive as a growing sector of Louisiana’s occupational field. These two catastrophic storms damaged, destroyed, or left 850,791 housing units inaccessible (Kirchoff, 2005). Given these damages, the construction industry became essential in helping Louisiana and the southeast United States recover. Inevitably, with the increasing rate of employment in this field comes an increasing number of work-related injuries, illnesses, and fatalities. Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2010) indicates that for the 135,900 construction workers employed in Louisiana in 2009, there was an average incident rate of 2.4 cases per 100 workers, equivalent to 3,262 reported injuries or illnesses. These construction injuries and illnesses make up a majority of the reported 5,403 which includes transportation as well.

Construction work is a physically demanding field where workers are always on their feet and are constantly exposed to external elements such as sun and rain. Employees also put their physical state at risk by using heavy machinery or by working at great heights on a daily basis, which puts them at a higher risk of work-related injury, illnesses, or fatalities compared to other occupations. For this reason, safety regulations should be stringently enforced to reduce these incidents.

Occupational safety in transportation

Transportation is also another leader in occupational safety and health disparities. According to OSHA, in conjunction with the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), “Every 5 seconds a crash occurs. Every 7 seconds a property damage crash occurs. Every 10 seconds there is a traffic-related injury. Every 12 minutes someone in the U.S. dies in a traffic crash” (Lusby-Treber, 2004). In 2009, the Bureau of Labor and Statistics (2010) reports that there are 377,200 workers employed in the trade, transportation, and utilities sector in Louisiana. For every 100 workers, 3.4 injuries or illnesses were reported, equivalent to 12,825 injuries or illnesses.

Truck drivers’ working conditions range from unanticipated weather and traffic conditions to boredom and fatigue. Drivers also frequently travel at night, on holidays, and on weekends to avoid traffic delays so that they can make their deliveries on time. Although the U.S. Department of Transportation regulates the number of hours an individual can spend on the road, the previously mentioned factors have a large role in transportation accidents. These incidents not only affect the individuals but their employers as well. In 2000, the total societal cost of motor vehicle crashes was \$230.6 billion; of this, \$60 billion were a cost to employers (Lusby-Treber, 2004). Implementing road safety procedures would

reduce these costs of accidents to employers as well as increase workplace safety for employees.

Interventions to Increase Occupational Safety in Construction and Transportation

A Six Step Framework

Statistics previously stated suggest that an intervention towards reduction of work-related injuries in the construction and transportation sectors should be implemented. Louisiana Workers’ Compensation Corporation (2010) recommends a six step framework towards reducing occupational safety in both the construction and transportation industries. Steps one, two, and three address the fundamentals of workplace safety, and steps four, five and six are methods and processes to develop interventions and assess outcomes

Step 1: Ensure management’s commitment to improve occupational safety. The first and most important step to any intervention is to ensure management’s commitment to improve occupational safety. The management staff is the primary enforcer of reporting safety issues. Without management’s strong commitment, employees will also not be as motivated towards improvement.

Step 2: Assess compliance with safety regulations. A company needs to assess how well its employees are adhering to the current rules and regulations. This step involves management understanding the employees’ view of the rules and why some rules are or are not followed.

Step 3: Identify the main causes of injury or illness. To be able to reduce the incidents of injury and illness, a company must first find out what initially causes them.

Step 4: Establish, maintain, and enforce a compliance program, and set a goal. The fourth

step is for companies to design, establish, maintain, and enforce a compliance program. During this step the companies should set a goal to address any of the issues found during the assessments made in the previous steps. For example, in the construction industry, a reasonable goal is to have 100 days without any incidents of injury, illness, or fatality.

Step 5: Increase employees' awareness and desire for improvement. Upon selecting a compliance or training program, and a reasonable and measurable goal, employees should be made well aware of targeted improvements and procedures to follow. Without employees' commitment to the program, it is not possible to reach the goals. Managers should clearly explain the objectives of the programs, the rationale to implement them, and the importance of following regulations not only for their own safety but also to help the company comply to federal and state regulations and laws instead of running the risk of being fined or even closed.

Step 6: Evaluate to determine if improvement was made. This should be performed at set time intervals throughout the year. If improvements have been made, the company should continue implementing the program and set an even higher goal. If not, the company should then modify the program to make necessary changes and continue striving for improvement to achieve the desired goal.

The Impact of Implementing Training and Enforcement Programs

Those entering the workforce right away as laborers or apprentices usually learn the skills needed for the job based on informal first-hand observation and experience. However, to reduce work-related injuries, illnesses, or fatalities, formal training and classroom education are a must. As one of the strategies to decrease work-related injuries, OSHA has successfully

implemented several on-site and online trainings which are officially recognized by the U.S. Department of Labor. The outreach training programs have objectives of teaching all construction and general workers and supervisors the basics of occupational safety and health, the importance of recognizing work-related hazards, and how to prevent injury and illness in the workplace. More in-depth courses are also available to learn about the most common work related hazards and injuries and how to manage hazardous materials.

Specifically, in Louisiana, a 30-hour OSHA approved training course on construction safety is available in Baton Rouge. This course is designed to improve safety procedures that can minimize injuries, illnesses, and fatalities at the worksite (Easy Safety School, 2010). The training course, whether in-person, online, or through self-studying, could contribute not only to reducing injuries, illnesses, and fatalities, but also reduce production loss from such incidents and decrease the likelihood of fines and penalties from lack of compliance with OSHA regulations. In the construction and transportation fields, the majority of incidents occur due to lack of training or enforcement of policies and regulations. Therefore, implementing more in-depth training and safety courses for both new and current employees would greatly improve safety and reduce injuries, illnesses, or fatalities.

In the construction sector, Gateway Constructors has proved that training is effective. During the reconstruction of Interstate 64 in April 2007, Gateway Constructors formed a partnership with OSHA to promote the health and safety of its 450 employees. Through the attendance of 12 training classes aimed towards health and safety on the worksite, Gateway Constructors were able to produce a total case incidence rate of 2.87, which is 57 percent lower than the Bureau of Labor and Statistics' 2007 national average of 5.9 cases per 100 workers (Wheeler, 2009).

Regarding the transportation sector, General Motors created a safe driving training program entitled “Create the Habit” in which its employees are required to participate. In November 1998, there was only a 61 percent seat belt usage rate. However, after implementing the program, 85 percent of employees used their seatbelts by December 2003. Charter Communications in Michigan also shows how enforcing workplace policies can contribute towards reducing transportation disparity. In 2001, only 74 percent of employees were using seatbelts in company vehicles. After the company implemented and strongly reinforced a policy regarding the use of seatbelts, the seatbelt usage rate increased to 94 percent in 2003 (Lusby-Treber, 2004). Increase of employees’ awareness and desire for improvement can be achieved through “buckle up” posters displayed around the worksite or verbal encouragements of buckling up upon seeing an employee enter a company vehicle. Unplanned safety procedure observations or surprise seatbelt checks entering or leaving the facility can also further enforce compliance to the program. Whether in the form of verbal reminders that there will be a mandatory safety course the following week or posters demonstrating proper safety techniques displayed around the worksite, emphasis on training or enforcement programs should not diminish.

Conclusion

Occupational injuries, illnesses, and fatalities are apparent in all fields of work. Data discussed in this essay show that those employed in the transportation and construction industries are at higher risk than other occupations, and therefore suffer a disparity. Healthy People 2020 recognizes this concern and is making an effort to reduce such rates. Utilizing Louisiana Workers’ Compensation Corporation’s six steps of intervention and implementing appropriate training programs and safety measures can reduce

disparity in these occupational sectors, providing benefit to both employee and employer.

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