Violence In The Workplace

*We must become more concerned about unhealthy and unsafe
workplaces and the contaminated environment around them.
We must work towards a better legacy for our children and
grandchildren. We must remain active and demand change.
We owe it to ourselves and future generations.*

–   Dick Martin

Dick Martin fought to keep workers protected from the hazards they faced everyday in their jobs. My goal is to continue that battle with a focus on violence in the workplace.

At a conference last year I was speaking with a woman who had been assaulted by a client while traveling home from work. The client was angry with a decision the woman (his case manager) had made about his case. She was off work for an extended period of time and on top of the trauma of the incident she was fighting with her employer to convince them that her assault was work related. I felt so angry and sad all at the same time. It was occurrences like this that motivated Dick Martin to take up the cause of safety and it was that meeting that motivated me to focus on violence in the workplace as part of my studies.

Violence in Our Workplaces

We know that the Canadian workplace is contaminated with physical, chemical and biological agents. We have been slower to recognize that the psychological threat facing workers everyday is just as dangerous. In the workplace, violent acts including threatening behaviour, bullying, harassment, verbal abuse and physical assaults are associated with individual suffering and poor worker morale as well as negative economic effects. Everyday workers suffer physical and mental effects and even death as a result of violence at work.

Between 1985 and 2001 the wage loss claims with the WCB of BC for incidents of violence in the health care sector increased 88% (ILO Report, 2002 as cited in FIOH, 2002). This has been happening in a time that the profile of health and safety was increasing. Somehow violence has been missed as an area that requires our attention and funding. If it had been a focus, the increase in claims could have been controlled and a huge savings could have been achieved. On a more human level, individuals and their friends, families and co-workers could have been spared the physical and psychological damage that is a result of violence in the workplace.

What is Violence?

In BC, the WCB defines violence in the workplace as an act between a worker and a member of the public. Incidents between workers are considered "Inappropriate Workplace Conduct". This is a hard distinction to explain to the average worker affected by either but an important point to consider when designing a prevention strategy for violence. The question we must start with is always, "whom do we need to protect our workers from?" The answer is, sadly, everyone.

Violence comes in many forms from many sources and affects every person differently. The CCOHS includes the following examples on the website:

- Rumours
- Swearing
- Verbal abuse
- Pranks
- Arguments
- Property damage
- Vandalism
- Sabotage

- Pushing
- Theft
- Physical assaults
- Psychological trauma
- Anger-related incidents
- Rape
- Arson
- Murder

- CCOHS, 2003

We know that workers who work alone, with cash or late at night are more likely to experience violence in the workplace but we must also consider the incidents that occur subtly in an office or away from work. The example of the Case Manager was a good example of this need.

Last year the community of Kamloops in BC's Cariboo was shocked when a member of that community entered his workplace with a gun and killed two of his fellow workers. Incidents such as these tend to gain the media spot light and rather than examining the conditions that lead to the incident we are told about the anger of the perpetrator and the innocence of the victims. What the media fails to examine are the conditions that existed in that workplace.

Rather than a random act, violence in the workplace is more accurately viewed as a result of a combination of factors including individual behaviour, workplace conditions, interactions between co-workers, relationships between workers and managers and interactions with customers or clients.

Preventing the Violence

Preventing violence in the workplace will require safety professionals, workers, labour leaders and managers to take a look at the conditions in their workplaces and assess the risk. A program needs to be in place on some level in every workplace to prevent incidents of violence. A comprehensive program would include:

- Worker education and training
- Supervisor training
- Incident response team training
- Dispute resolution programs
- Pre-employment screening
- Security measures

The success of a violence program is dependant on the culture of the workplace. An effective program must have the commitment of management and workers. Workers will participate if they feel play a role in the program and managers will want to see the benefits of the program initiatives. The Workplace Violence Research Institute recommends that a committee, made up of labour and management, be formed to oversee the design and implementation of a violence prevention program. This method is more likely to achieve worker and manager buy-in.

Violence in Workplaces Around the World

Dick Martin felt that safety was becoming a global issue and I have to agree. With the growth of the global economy comes the increased need for safety management worldwide. Some examples of violence issues around the world include:

- Increased suicide rates amongst workers in Japan
- EU reports that 2-4% of workers have experience violence at work
- In the US violence is a leading cause of worker illness and death
- In South Africa 78% of workers reported that they had experienced bullying at work

- V. Di Martino in FIOH, 2002

In North America, employers are required to show a reasonable duty of care for their health and safety. If that standard is not met employers face consequences. Around the world the duty of care is not a legal requirement for all jurisdictions and it is up to every one of us to carry on the Dick Martin's legacy by voicing our demands for violence-free workplaces throughout the world. This is my goal as a Health and Safety Professional.

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