



Ontario Nurses' Association

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To: Local Coordinators, Bargaining Unit Presidents, Joint Health and Safety Committee (JHSC) members from the Executive Booklet and Health and Safety Network Leads

From: Linda Haslam-Stroud, RN, President

Date: January 8, 2013

Re: **Hazards Associated with Cleaning Products**

C: Board of Directors, District Service Teams (DSTs) and Provincial Services Team (PST)

ONA has received numerous reports of symptoms from nurses exposed to bleach fumes in hospitals around the province. We understand that bleach wipes have been introduced to hospitals in an attempt to control the presence of *c difficile*. Reported symptoms have included eye and skin irritation, headaches, light headedness, nausea, shortness of breath, etc. Workers in one hospital engaged in a work refusal before the employer heeded their health and safety concerns.

A 2011 study (attached) using five years of Ontario Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) claims found that, "Health care was the most frequent industry for work exacerbated asthma (WEA) in the province," with a rate of "more than double" the WEA claims compared to the rest of the province. Registered nurses represented almost a third of all the WSIB claims for WEA.

Researchers confirmed that the "health-care setting presents opportunities for exposure to respiratory irritants and sensitizers," and exposure to cleaning agents/bleaches/fresheners was the leading cause of WEA. They noted the "importance of bystander exposure" to cleaning products when workers aren't actually using a product but are in the vicinity of its use. They also mentioned the "possibility of mixed exposures," presumably to a combination of fumes from more than one substance.

The Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers (OHCOW) can provide guidance and information and has a resource sheet, "Work Related Asthma and You: Cleaning Products," available online at the following site:

http://www.healthandsafetyontario.ca/HSO/media/WSPS/Resources/Downloads/fd_WRA_Cleaning_FS_F_1.pdf?ext=.pdf

Ideally, employers ensure products are not brought into the workplace until they are screened through an occupational health and safety filter. If a product like bleach might generate fumes that could detrimentally affect workers and patients, the employer should first consider substituting a less hazardous alternative.

If the decision is made to introduce the product, the employer has general and specific duties under the *Occupational Health and Safety Act (OHSA)* to ensure its safe use. Among those duties, the employer must "provide information, instruction and supervision to a worker to protect the health or safety of the worker."

Provincial Office: Toronto

Regional Offices: Ottawa • Hamilton • Kingston • London
Orillia • Sudbury • Thunder Bay • Timmins • Windsor

Employers must also provide access for workers to Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDSs) for hazardous materials used in their workplaces. An MSDS documents the potential health effects of exposure to the product, safe handling procedures and protective and reactive measures to take when potentially exposed to the hazardous material.

Next Steps

JHSC

Particularly given the number of complaints around the province, we ask that you raise this issue of bleach wipe/cleaners at your JHSC. Ask your employer to provide such information as:

- Has this product been introduced to your workplace.
- Was a less hazardous substitute considered or would the employer now consider a substitute.
- Was information, instruction, training provided to potentially affected workers (those using the product as well as bystanders) about associated hazards and protections.
- Were measures and procedures devised and implemented to limit worker exposure.
- What personal protective equipment (PPE) is needed and supplied, and were workers trained in its use.
- Have there been any reports of incidents or concerns associated with the use of the bleach wipes.
- Were WSIB claims filed.

Consider using the attached sample recommendation for the JHSC or the worker co-chair to submit to the employer.

Report to supervisor/employer

ONA urges members to report any health and safety concerns to their supervisors, who should take every precaution reasonable in the circumstances to protect a worker. If the concern is not resolved, bring it to the attention of the ONA member on the JHSC, who can raise it for discussion and resolution at the next meeting. However, we do not expect members to wait for meetings to resolve immediate health and safety concerns. Elevate unresolved health and safety concerns as high in the employer organization as necessary, as quickly as necessary, to protect a worker.

Consider calling the Ministry of Labour

If that does not work, or if the nature of the hazard requires immediate control, you may need to call the Ministry of Labour to assist. Ontario has launched a Health and Safety Contact Centre with a toll-free number (1-877-202-0008) to report workplace health and safety incidents or unsafe work practices. If the employer cannot resolve a worker's concerns about possible exposure hazardous substance at her/his workplace, the worker may wish to call the toll-free number to request a visit by an inspector

If you have any questions, please consult your ONA Labour Relations Officer (LRO).