

# Occupational health - not just about safety

 By Louise Woodburn

15 Feb 2022

When it comes to occupational health and safety, many organisations focus their efforts on the immediately impactful element of safety, especially in heavily regulated industries. However, while ensuring workplace safety is paramount, occupational health is also critical. Occupational illnesses can have devastating effects, both for employees and the business itself, as the Covid-19 pandemic has starkly highlighted. When it comes to conducting risk assessments and putting appropriate plans in place for 2022, occupational health needs to take centre stage.



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## What is an occupational disease?

Occupational illnesses and diseases are conditions or health problems that come about due to the nature of work that people are involved in. This includes skin disorders like dermatitis, respiratory illnesses such as asthma and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, musculoskeletal disorders, hearing loss, cancer, stress and mental disorders, and infectious diseases. While none of these are new issues, the pandemic has put infectious diseases in the spotlight, paving the way for greater focus on occupational health.

## Not just about safety

The safety element of occupational health and safety is more widely understood, because it is a more immediate problem – for example, if the appropriate scaffolding and safety equipment is not used on a construction site, and someone falls and fatally injures themselves, the repercussions are clear. Occupational illness is a greater challenge, because it may be more difficult to see in the short-term.

However, the Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) Act specifies both safety and health, which means that it must be considered in risk assessments and training. The impact to the business of an occupational health incident is similar to that of a safety incident – there is reputational damage involved.

There are also financial implications, such as the need to pay for medical treatment, which would increase Compensation for Occupational Injuries and Diseases (COID) insurance premiums. Apart from this, there is a moral aspect to consider, as well as the fact that companies with poor health and safety records have trouble attracting and retaining staff.

## **A proactive approach is essential**

Aside from infectious diseases, which are more immediately apparent, most occupational illnesses are the result of prolonged exposure over extended periods of time. This means that it can take years for the effects to be noticeable, and by that stage there is often very little that can be done to correct the outcome.

It is therefore critical to take a more proactive approach to occupational health and bring this into greater awareness as part of risk assessments and training. Potential dangers need to be identified and mitigating processes put into place to prevent these illnesses from occurring in the first place.

## **Taking the long-term view**

Apart from the need to meet legal obligations around health and safety, employers should be adopting a futuristic view. The newer generation of workers are far more aware of these issues and will often actively seek an employer that takes their health and well-being into account. On the other side of the coin, developing a reputation as an employer of choice from both a mental and physical health point of view can help businesses to attract talent. Employee morale will also be consequently higher, leading to a more productive workforce and ultimately a more profitable business.

The world of work is changing, and the link between employee wellness and business success can no longer be ignored. Working with a qualified Safety, Health, Environment and Quality (SHEQ) partner has become key in managing all aspects of health, safety, risk and awareness, both to avoid the negatives of risk, and to reap the rewards of the positive elements. The Covid-19 pandemic has changed the world, and it has brought the importance of occupational health to the fore, and it needs to be a focus for businesses in 2022.

## **ABOUT LOUISE WOODBURN**

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