

Safety for lone workers

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A recent article in the New York Times described a situation in which a supervisor of a hospital was killed by asphyxiation while working alone in a trailer outside the hospital. Apparently, a liquid nitrogen tank valve was leaking to the extent that oxygen in the room was displaced with nitrogen. While this was not a laboratory incident, it has stimulated discussion once again about the dangers and precautions necessary for those people who work alone.

In Alberta, the murder of a convenience store employee who was working alone late one evening instigated Alberta Workplace Health & Safety to develop a regulation regarding working alone, as well as a set of guidelines to assist employers who have lone workers.

Definition

Working alone usually implies working without close or direct supervision. Lone workers do not have visual or audible contact with another person who can provide or call for assistance in the event of accident or illness.

When should a person not work alone?

Ideally, it is not advisable to have workers work alone. However, there are numerous cases when workers are required to work alone. The essential determining factor should be a risk assessment for the tasks that the lone worker is required to perform.

Performing a risk assessment

Identify the equipment a worker is expected to use, and determine if the equipment can be handled by one person. Identify the chemicals and other

agents to which the worker may be exposed, and determine if working alone may pose a higher risk of exposure. Identify if there is the potential for violence, and determine what deterrents are in place. Identify any workers who are medically unfit to work alone due to added stresses which may be imposed in emergency situations. To ensure due diligence and comply with various working alone regulations, ensure that the risk assessment is written.

Develop and implement controls

1. Ensure safe access and exit for the worker. Some laboratory doors may be locked off-hours; if this is the case, ensure that the worker knows all possible emergency exits.

2. Provide a communication system for the worker to use in the event of an emergency situation. This may involve scheduled "check-ins" with a worker in another area, or by security personnel. It may involve a panic button to summon help quickly. There are also automatic warning devices available with built-in motion detectors that are programmed to summon assistance when there is no movement for a period of time.

3. In laboratories, ensure that workers always utilize all required personal protective equipment, and that all emergency response and first aid equipment is available and functioning.

4. Where possible, redesign the work so that higher risk activities are performed during the day, when greater numbers of workers are present.

5. In isolated areas where visits from unwelcome persons may occur, attempt to limit access.

6. Train all workers who are required to work alone to avoid panic reactions in emergency situations. Ensure that lone workers understand risks and apply all available precautions. Inform workers of circumstances when they should stop work and seek additional advice. Provide training on handling aggression wherever this may be an identified risk.

7. Document all aspects of your system for controlling risks for employees working alone, and ensure that all staff who may be expected to work alone are familiar with your control program.

Many laboratories require employees to work alone at times – either in an isolated laboratory or in a main laboratory off-hours. Sometimes on-call technologists enter the laboratory for a period of time to perform required diagnostic tests when the laboratory is officially closed. In any of these situations, it is advisable (and often required) to have a hazard control plan established and well communicated. Controlling the risks is critical to ensuring the safety of lone workers.

Check provincial legislation for specific details on safety requirements for lone workers.

