

# Health and Safety at the WCB: Focus Report 1997

**WorkSafe**



# Health and safety at the WCB

Just like any other employer in B.C., the Workers' Compensation Board is required by regulation to implement an occupational health and safety program to protect our employees from workplace injury and disease. Not only is the Board responsible for making and enforcing workplace safety regulations, we must also comply with them, and we want to ensure a safe and healthy working environment for every WCB employee.

Currently, the Board has 2,470 employees at 24 worksites located throughout the province. While we are set apart from most other employers in B.C. by our size and the diversity of our employee population, we share many of the same health and safety concerns. In 1997, for example, the WCB, like numerous other employers, was challenged by the need to reduce the risks posed by new technology and violence in the workplace.

The extent to which B.C. workplaces have changed over the past 20 years is reflected in the new *Occupational Health and Safety Regulation* coming into effect April 15, 1998. As your organization prepares to respond to the new *Regulation*, we hope that you find this report of some assistance. In addition to describing our occupational health and safety program, activities, and challenges, it is intended to provide practical information that you may apply at your worksite.

## The plan, program, and people

The WCB has a three-year action plan in place to identify and respond to the safety, health, and security needs of our employees. We have chosen to integrate security with health and safety because of its impact on the well-being of our employees. Our three-year plan is based on formal safety program audits that are conducted every three to four years.

Our occupational health and safety program flows out of this plan and is administered by the WCB's Safety, Health and Security Department. The department supports a Central Safety Committee and 24 Local Safety Committees as well as managers, supervisors, and staff in carrying out their safety, health, and security responsibilities.

The Central Safety Committee is made up of three worker and three management representatives. It represents the interests of WCB employees province-wide and deals with issues raised by Local Safety Committees. Local Safety Committees are composed of an equal number of worker and management representatives. Each addresses the interests and concerns of employees in a particular geographic area and reports monthly to the Central Safety Committee.

Managers and supervisors at the WCB are responsible for inspecting their work areas, establishing site-specific procedures, holding safety meetings, investigating incidents and accidents, keeping records and statistics, and educating and training employees. All WCB staff are responsible for knowing and following the safety, health, and security policies and procedures applicable to their jobs.

The Safety, Health and Security Department is an interdisciplinary team of health and safety professionals who implement programs and projects and respond to requests for assistance. The department measures the impact of its work by tracking injury rates, safety meeting activities, and incidents on a monthly basis, and by feedback from staff.



***During NAOSHWeek '97, the WCB's Safety, Health and Security Department and Central Safety Committee organized displays, contests, and other activities to raise awareness about safety on the job***

## Major accomplishments

**An expanded occupational health and safety program.** The revamped program responds to recommendations made by WCB staff during the Board's 1995 safety audit. Staff called for a more user-friendly program with a reduced requirement for user training.

The expanded program is supported by two new manuals released in June 1997 and a new workbook distributed in November 1997.

- The *WCB Safety, Health and Security Program Manual* is a corporate handbook of Board-wide policies and procedures. Developed as a resource for managers, this manual provides the Board's interpretation of occupational health and safety requirements.
- The *WCB Safety, Health and Security Site-Specific Program Manual* contains procedures and guidelines that managers and staff can customize to meet the safety needs of specific worksites. This manual's content was developed on the basis of employee and safety committee feedback, risk assessments, and safety audits.
- The *Manager's Safety, Health and Security Workbook* incorporates self-learning principles to assist managers in meeting their safety, health, and security responsibilities. This monthly guide clearly identifies and presents managers' duties in chronological order. Contents include workplace inspection checklists, incident/accident investigation information, and resources such as videos and transparencies for presenting 12 monthly safety topics.

In addition to addressing the regulated aspects of occupational health and safety, the three guides also cover numerous other health and security initiatives, such as the Board's annual flu shot program and alarm system procedures. All guides are written in a simple, easy-to-follow style suitable for use by both new employees with no prior safety knowledge and seasoned safety professionals alike. These manuals won an award for excellence in the Society of Technical Communicators 1997 competition.

Two additional workbooks to assist Central and Local Safety Committee members in carrying out their monthly health, safety, and security duties are currently being drafted and will be incorporated into the safety program in April 1998. A generic version of the entire program that can be customized by any B.C. employer will be made available on CD-ROM at the end of 1998.

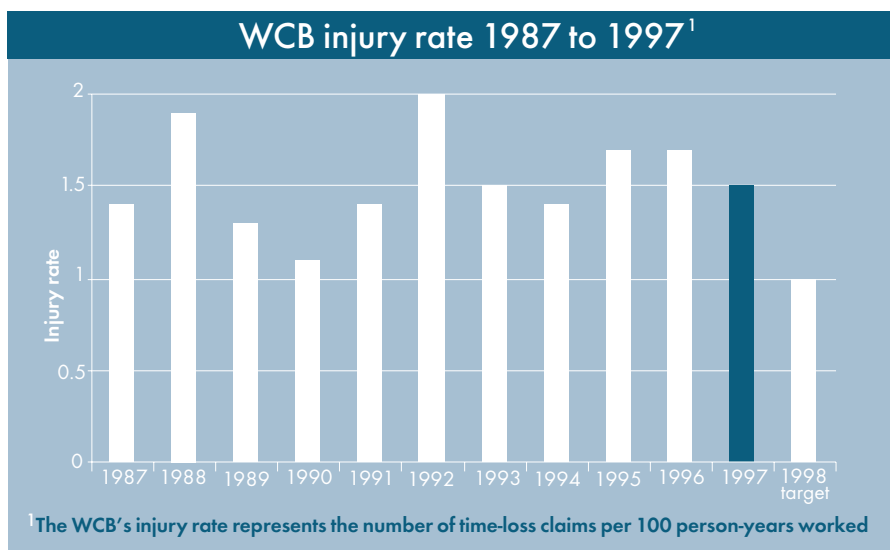
**A 12-percent reduction in the Board's injury rate.** The WCB's injury rate – the number of time-loss claims per 100 person-years worked – was 1.5 in 1997 compared to 1.7 in 1996, lowering the Board's 10-year average injury rate from 1.6 to 1.5. With the launch of our revamped safety program in 1997, we anticipate reducing the Board's injury rate even more in 1998.

Most businesses in B.C. can gauge their health and safety performance by comparing their own injury rate to that of others in their industry subclass. Because the nature of our business puts the WCB in a subclass of its own, we currently can only measure ourself against our own past performance. We are seeking comparable data from other Canadian WCBs which, when available, will serve as another means for measurement.

The total number of time-loss and health-care-only claims for all injury types decreased by only one from 87 in 1996 to 86 in 1997. However, of these claims, the number of time-loss claims reduced 30 percent from 47 in 1996 to 33 in 1997. The significant reduction in these claims points to a lower level of serious injuries. This decrease also resulted in a lower injury rate for the WCB.

The introduction of our new E-File electronic claims system has had a significant impact on job activities and the physical layout of workstations (see "A lesson in ergonomics" on previous page). As a result, activity-related soft-tissue disorders (ASTDs) – already the largest single injury category at the WCB – were expected to rise significantly in 1997.

However, the total number of ASTD short-term disability claims decreased from 38 in 1996 to 31 in 1997. This reduction and the prevention of an anticipated increase in ASTD claims are primarily due to the more than 800 individual ergonomic assessments and the departmental reviews and training sessions with staff and management conducted through the year.

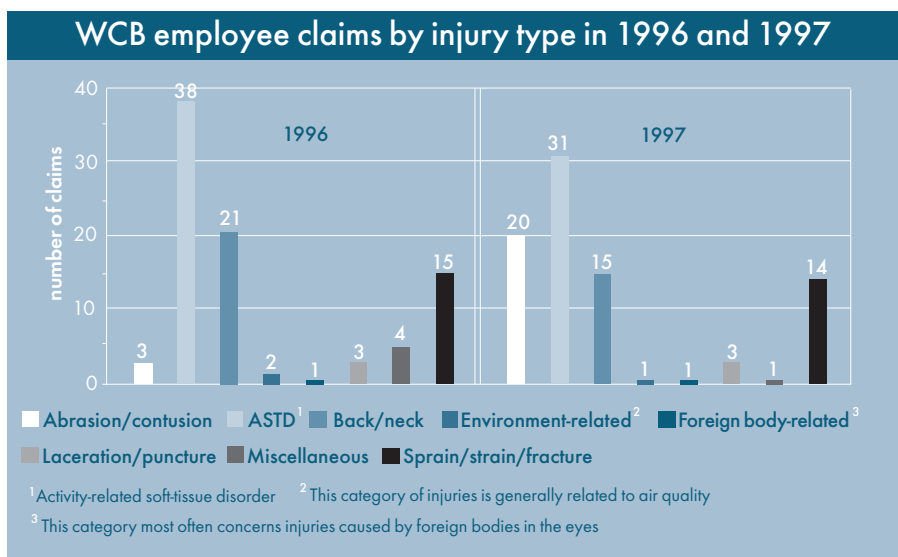
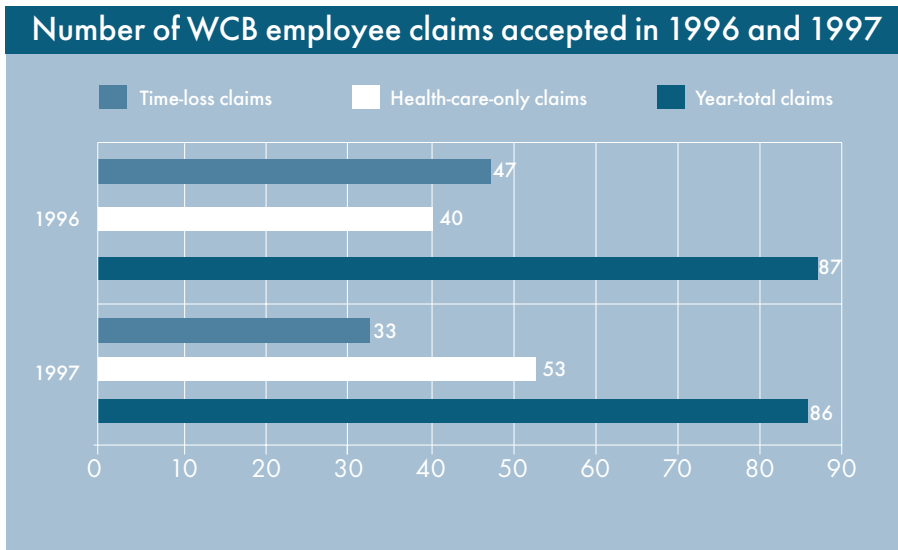


**New training programs to address emerging workplace safety concerns.**

In addition to training managers on their health and safety responsibilities and how to use their manager’s workbook, the Safety, Health and Security Department provided specialized training on the prevention of ergonomic-related injuries, fire safety, and emergency preparedness, among other topics. During the year, more than 1,200 employees also participated in training seminars on defusing hostility and reducing the threat of violence on the job (see “Training reduces risk of workplace violence” at right).

**North American Occupational Safety and Health (NAOSH) Week awards.**

Formerly known as Canadian Occupational Health and Safety Week, NAOSHWeek in British Columbia is jointly sponsored by Human Resources Development Canada, the WCB of B.C., the B.C. Ministry of Labour, and the Canadian Society of Safety Engineers. Working around the week’s 1997 theme, “Managing Safety,” the WCB’s Safety, Health and Security Department and Central Safety Committee organized an intensive, week-long schedule of in-house and community-based safety awareness displays and activities. Our NAOSHWeek program earned the WCB honours as Best New Entry and Best in the Provincial/Crown Corporation category. The Safety, Health and Security Department received a special achievement award for Best Safety Department in a company of more than 500 people.



**Areas identified for improvement**

**Safety meetings.** Safety meetings are forums for training, raising safety awareness, and discussing specific problems and issues. At the WCB, three types of safety meetings must take place regularly: a Central Safety Committee meeting, 24 Local Safety Committee meetings, and some 100 staff safety meetings.

While the Central Safety Committee has not missed a monthly meeting in a decade, the WCB’s 1995 safety program audit indicated that the committee’s effectiveness could be improved in two ways: it could respond more promptly to safety issues and it could increase its level of contact with Local Safety Committees. These areas are being addressed through formalization of committee procedures in the new *Central Safety Committee Member’s Workbook* and through the development of strategies to improve the committee’s efficiency.

In turn, although most Local Safety Committees meet monthly, many require assistance to conduct their meetings. Some committees do not fully understand the extent of their responsibilities or how they should be fulfilled. Some members have been prevented from attending meetings by their high-priority workloads and the need to participate in E-File training. These problems will be addressed by the *Local Safety Committee Member’s Workbook* currently in development, and designed to include a monthly summary of activities to be carried out, and tips on workplace inspections, accident investigations, and reporting to the Central Safety Committee.

Staff safety meetings, while conducted in compliance with health and safety regulations, are not conducted in accordance with our own mandated frequency. This is primarily because managers had lacked easy access to appropriate training materials and resources. The *Manager’s Safety, Health and Security Workbook*, introduced in 1997, includes a schedule of monthly topics for safety meetings along with a complete presentation package for each, including handouts, transparencies, and videos. With these materials at hand, managers can now conduct effective safety meetings with minimal preparation or, if they prefer, delegate the task to appropriate presenters. Presentation of the same topic at monthly safety meetings Board-wide will support broad awareness of important safety issues. A total of 400 meetings Board-wide is the target for 1998.

**Threats of violence risk assessments.** In response to the risk of workplace violence in a wide range of industries across B.C., violence in the workplace regulations were introduced in 1993. These regulations require employers to conduct risk assessments, develop a prevention program, and train staff in dealing with potentially violent situations. The WCB has implemented a comprehensive threats of violence prevention and training program based on our 1992 Threats of Violence Conference and the findings of a subsequent joint committee. Informal employee and worksite assessments were carried out as part of that program.

However, it was not until 1996 that a formal risk assessment was introduced to the Board and software written to accept the completed staff questionnaires. The risk assessment data collected during 1997 is being entered into a customized database that will allow us to identify key risk factors and high-risk employee groups and work situations. The existing threats of violence prevention program will be modified in 1998 on the basis of this data to further reduce the risk and incidence of workplace threats of violence.

A new Board-wide threat management system has been approved for development and will roll out in late 1998. This system will inform WCB staff of clients who have previously threatened or taken violent action toward a Board employee.

**Accident and incident reporting.** Timely reporting of workplace incidents and accidents is paramount to the prevention of further injuries. Introduction of the WCB's electronic Accident and Injury Reporting System in January 1997 significantly changed the way in which accidents are reported. In addition to switching from a manual, paper-based system to an electronic reporting system, managers were required to make more detailed reports on incidents and accidents. With the introduction of AIRS version 2 in 1998, the Safety, Health and Security Department will simplify the data collection system with the objective of improving incident reporting. A new comprehensive incident/accident reporting form is being designed to clarify reporting procedures and requirements.

## Objectives for 1998

In 1998, the WCB's overriding health and safety goal is to reduce workplace injuries and incidents by supporting managers and staff in achieving the compliance levels set out in the Board's own safety program.

Specific objectives are to:

- Develop and implement a train-the-trainer education program for Safety, Health and Security staff to enable them to assist managers in training their staff
- Continue to reduce the number of musculoskeletal injuries through ergonomic assessments of workstations and other work areas
- Reduce the incidence and severity of threats of violence in the workplace through improved monitoring and reporting, and ongoing training initiatives
- Develop a comprehensive emergency response program to equip the Board to handle natural disasters and other potential emergency situations
- Upgrade the existing Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System by replacing the current database to provide better access to accurate, current information about hazardous materials at all WCB worksites
- Enhance the overall effectiveness and cost-efficiency of the WCB's safety program through partnerships with other employers and community and professional organizations
- Capture the Best Crown Corporation Award in the 1998 NAOSHWeek competition

*With the help of professional trainers, WCB employees role-play both the wrong and right ways to defuse hostility at workplace violence prevention seminars*

## Training reduces risk of workplace violence

In 1997, the WCB experienced 226 workplace threats and/or acts of violence, up 11 percent from the 203 incidents in 1996. Given that the Board has 2,470 employees who serve more than 200,000 compensation clients each year, the number of incidents at the WCB may seem relatively small. However, these incidents affected nine percent of our employee population. As an employer, we take all risks to our staff's safety, health, and security seriously, including every threat and potential for violence.

To help WCB employees recognize and deal appropriately with work-related threats and acts of violence – which can range from verbal abuse to bomb threats – we have made a comprehensive training program available across the Board.

Terry Ho is one of the more than 1,200 employees who have participated in the WCB's seminars on defusing hostility and dealing with threats of violence. He recalls having had "some pretty hot people on the line" when handling claims phone control at one of the Board's service delivery locations.

He gives top marks to the WCB's four-hour workplace violence prevention training program, which reviews WCB regulations, teaches participants how to handle different types of potentially threatening situations, and provides tips for avoiding violent encounters.

"A lot of it was common sense and it reinforced what I already knew," says Ho, who had already received training in dealing with threatening individuals on the phone. "This time around I also learned new ways of handling difficult situations face-to-face."



## Tips on avoiding and managing workplace conflict

- Know yourself. Being aware of how assertive you are and how you react to anger can help you respond more effectively. If you have a quick temper, for example, you should approach confrontation with extra caution.
- Visualize potential situations and plan your response. This can help eliminate fear of the unknown and ensure you are not taken by surprise.
- Be aware of your surroundings. Avoid potentially violent situations through early assessment and by making yourself a 'tough target.'
- Learn and practise verbal and non-verbal techniques for de-escalating anger in others. For example, concentrate on what is being said rather than how it is being said. Be empathetic and allow the person to save face.
- Know and understand the threats of violence procedures that have been established at your workplace.

## A lesson in ergonomics

At a petite five feet, WCB case assistant Tari Fong discovered long ago that she just didn't fit a standard workstation. If she adjusted her chair to allow her feet to rest on the floor, her body was too low to comfortably use the desk. If she raised her chair, she was unable to use her feet to manoeuvre her chair around her workstation. Most of her days were spent cradling a phone between her ear and shoulder while looking down at paper files, periodically twisting her body to refer to her computer screen, and manually recording notes in files.

The WCB conducted an ergonomic assessment of Fong's workstation and modifications were introduced to alleviate her shoulder and neck problems. "The first thing I did was to use a headset instead of a phone," says Fong. "They lowered my desk and had footstools made for me. I also started using inclined book stands for writing notes and reviewing files." The changes were relatively simple but effective.

In May 1997, with the introduction of the Board's E-File electronic claims system, Fong was relocated to a new work area. The layout of her new work-station was significantly different, as were her daily job activities. As part of a Board-wide initiative to prevent the onset of musculoskeletal injuries, her new work space was given a complete ergonomic assessment. Her new desk was lowered, and Fong received training in minimizing ergonomic risk factors.

Fong recently consulted with the WCB's ergonomist about some discomfort she has begun to experience in her right arm. A firm believer in the value of ergonomics, she's optimistic that the advice she received will alleviate her discomfort.



### Ergonomics defined

Ergonomics is fitting the job to the worker by designing an environment that minimizes potential injury. The increasing importance of ergonomics to preventing injury is reflected by the inclusion of ergonomic requirements in the new *Occupational Health and Safety Regulation* to take effect April 15, 1998.

## Taking the pain out of work

Tari Fong managed to take the pain out of her work by following these tips provided by the WCB's ergonomist and outlined in *The WCB Employees' Guide to Workstation Ergonomics*:

- Use both hands together to reach for and grasp objects that you require during the course of your workday.
- When shifting around an L- or corner-shaped workstation, turn your whole body instead of only pivoting at the waist.
- Customize your computer for easier viewing. Fong has reduced screen glare by softening the background colour. She also manipulates E-File windows so they appear at eye level rather than the bottom of her screen.
- Adjust the lighting in your work area to reduce eye strain. Fong turns off the fluorescent fixture suspended over her workstation.
- Make a point of getting up and moving around periodically during the day.



## Need help with your occupational health and safety program?

For general information about occupational health and safety programs and answers to safety and health questions, contact your local WCB office or call the Prevention Information Line at:

**Toll free ..... 1 888 621-SAFE (7233), local 3100**  
**Lower Mainland ..... 604 276-3100**

For information about courses on occupational health and safety programs, contact your local WCB office or call the Prevention Division's Outreach-Education Section at:

**Toll free ..... 1 888 621-SAFE (7233), local 3099**  
**Lower Mainland ..... 604 276-3099**

To order WCB publications and videos, contact the Films and Posters Section at:

**Toll free ..... 1 800 661-2112, local 3068**  
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