

Compliance with OSHA Regs Alone won't Make Workplace Safe

"Workers are expendable in the United States."

That's the only explanation OSHA administrator David Michaels, Ph.D., could come up with while discussing workplace safety challenges at the ASSE Safety 2015 trade show in Dallas last month.

Michaels said that workplace fatalities have dropped from 37 to 12 a day since the inception of OSHA in 1970. It's not enough, though, he said, since it costs employees, industry and taxpayers more than \$200 billion a year, adding "taxpayers are subsidizing workplace hazards."

He also expressed concern about the reported three million injuries suffered in workplaces each year, a "significant undercount," and the 50,000 deaths from occupational illness. His solution: more regulations, which, he said, save lives, though he conceded, "compliance is great, but it doesn't get you there. You have to do more."

That's because many OSHA standards are out of date and don't cover all hazards.

He said, "Compliance with OSHA regulations won't make your workplace safe. From a legal point of view, your workplace may be safer, but it's not safe."

He urged compliance with applicable ANSI and other voluntary standards, and said OSHA will continue to use the general duty clause to penalize unsafe workplaces that ignore best practices and recognized standards.

Meanwhile, the National Safety Council is calling on employers to better understand and identify the risks associated with occupational illnesses.

Workplace-related illnesses are estimated to result in 53,000 deaths and 427,000 non-fatal illnesses each year, compared to workplace-related injuries, which are estimated by NSC to result in almost 4,000 deaths and 4.8 million injuries requiring medical attention annually.

Given the often delayed onset of illnesses, these numbers are estimated to be low.

"Workplace fatalities due to illness are estimated to be more than ten times that of deaths from workplace injuries," said Deborah A.P. Hersman, president and CEO of NSC. "

Many workplace illnesses occur from exposure to chemicals. OSHA estimates there may be as many as 650,000 hazardous chemical products in use in the U.S. These chemicals pose a wide range of health and physical hazard, and many have long-lasting effects after exposure, the intensity and duration of which can vary.

To better address workplace illnesses, NSC has issued a new policy position recommending employers:

- Consider the latest available scientific research, consensus standards, employer best practices and other reliable sources of information for determining the most effective control strategies.
- Determine how to improve reporting and tracking of occupational illnesses to support better understanding, prioritization, progress measurement and research.
- Share information and practices on prevention of occupational illness.

- Continue a process of improvement for managing exposure to chemicals that reduces risks to acceptable levels according to the hierarchy of control.
- Contribute to a process of review and update for existing standards necessary to protect workers from harmful exposure to chemicals as well as other new standards that may be necessary.

Though he was there to also renew OSHA's alliance with ASSE, Michaels received less than a warm welcome from attendees during the convention's plenary session. He took it in stride, noting what he had in common with the group.

"You are the messengers of safety and health," he told them, and asked them to relay the following message: "OSHA doesn't want to inspect after a fatality or serious injury, we want to see changes before the next person gets hurt."

That would be one good way to show the value of American workers.

Thanks and good luck.

