

BULLETIN

Fragrance free, please: survey shows HSA members support scent-free environments

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Adverse health effects from exposure to perfumes and fragranced products are becoming more frequent, both in and out of the workplace.

Adverse reaction to fragrances include irritation of the upper and lower respiratory system (including asthmatic reactions), dermatitis, migraines, dizziness, confusion, fatigue, and in extreme cases, anaphylactic reactions. In many cases, people who suffer such adverse reactions are allergic or sensitized specifically to some chemical(s) in the fragrance. In other cases, people with more generalized chemical sensitivity suffer adverse health effects when exposed to fragrances.

There is evidence that such sensitization can be caused not only by high level chemical exposure, but in some cases may also result from long term exposure to much lower concentrations of various chemicals, including fragrances.

HSA members have become increasingly concerned over the adverse health effects from exposure to fragrances.

A 1997 convention resolution led to HSA producing the "Report on Scent Allergies," which summarized some of the available information on this problem. At HSA's Convention in 2000, the membership called for a survey to determine the extent of the problem among HSA members. The results of this survey are described below.

The HSA Scent Survey was distributed last fall to a small, random sample of HSA members at most HSA worksites. Completed questionnaires were received from 493 members.

Ninety per cent of respondents believe that scents in their workplace pose some level of occupational health hazard. One out of every four respondents believe scents constitute a very important health hazard where they work. More than half of the survey respondents felt strongly enough about this issue to provide extensive comments with their questionnaires.

Seventy per cent of respondents were actually aware of specific situations where scents in their workplace had created health problems, either for themselves or for one or more co-workers. Such problems were seen most frequently in office areas, but were almost equally common in client waiting areas, diagnostic areas and treatment areas.

Workers reporting adverse effects came from a wide range of occupations, covering basically all of the paramedical professions, RPNs, other nursing professionals, support staff, physicians and managers. Several respondents were also aware of patients/clients and members of the public who had experienced adverse effects from scents in the respondents workplaces. Many respondents knew of more than one person at their

worksite who had been adversely affected by scents at work.

The most common source of scent hazards were co-workers, followed closely by patients/clients. Scent hazards were far less frequently due to exposure to a patient/clients family or friends, or the general public. This could be due to the fact that members work in much closer proximity with, and spend much more time with colleagues and patients, than with patients families and friends, or the general public.

The HSA survey shows that fragrances clearly pose a significant workplace health hazard for many HSA members and their colleagues, regardless of their occupation. This hazard is encountered in many different types of worksites, and in many different areas within worksites.

Workplace scent policies are an important tool in minimizing scents, especially from employees and patients. These groups are not only the most common scent sources, but are also the people at a worksite most likely to comply with employer scent policies. More than 75 per cent of HSA members surveyed support establishing a "scent free environment" policy in their workplace.

Despite the value and support for such policies, only a third of HSA members surveyed work at a facility that has a workplace scent policy. These results show that HSA health and safety activists need to continue to push for scent policies in their workplaces.

Although BCs Occupational Health and Safety Regulation does not specifically regulate scents in the workplace, members pushing for scent free policies can cite section 2.2 (the general duty provision) and section 5.2 (a provision dealing with exposure to a chemical or biological substance which could cause an adverse health effect).

In workplaces where there are staff who experience disabling reactions when exposed to scents, members should also argue that employers have a duty to accommodate those employees by providing a scent free work environment.

Members who want more information on adverse health effects from exposure to scents, or samples of scent free work environment policies, should contact Carol Riviere, HSAs OH&S Labour Relations Officer, at the HSA office.

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