

BULLETIN

Relentless advocacy led to investigation of health concerns

April 1, 2007

The Report: April / May 2007 vol.28 num.2

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The David Bland Memorial Award

After years of complaints about incineration fumes and other air quality concerns in the laboratory, one of her colleagues was diagnosed with cancer. Then another. And another. And yet another. An alarming number of her colleagues were being diagnosed, all within months of each other.

Bev Banfield knew she had to act.

Her efforts eventually led to the identification - and official investigation - of a cancer cluster at Mission Memorial Hospital.

And for her relentless advocacy, Bev Banfield has been awarded HSA's new health and safety prize: the David Bland Memorial Award.

Banfield was presented the award during HSA's annual convention in April.

The David Bland Memorial Award - newly established this year - recognizes HSA members who have championed a local occupational health and safety issue, with their leadership making a difference in the lives of their colleagues.

The award honours David Bland, a vocational rehabilitation counsellor from Richmond Mental Health, who was murdered at his workplace by a former client in 2005.

When asked about the award, HSA President Cindy Stewart falls silent for a moment.

"The board wanted to do something to commemorate such a significant event in the life of HSA," she said.

"We wanted to pay tribute to David, and the fact that - like it or not - what happened to him galvanized a whole industry around exposing the need to step up the work on violence in the workplace. And we didn't want it to pass without some kind of recognition and commemoration that would ensure that this was forever part of our history."

Stewart explained that in recognizing members and staff, HSA has historically tended towards scholarships and memorial funds. "For example, we have the Joe Madden Fund to commemorate a former executive director. And we have the Ann Hallman scholarship to remember an outstanding member whose courage

inspired all of us to keep fighting for what's right.

"The new David Bland Memorial Award provides us the opportunity to celebrate and showcase some of the work that individual members do," she said.

The only problem? "The calibre of the nominees was extraordinary. That's the problem with awards.

"We got a glimpse of what some of our members do, and how highly they are regarded by their colleagues. If this year was any indication, this is not going to be an easy award to adjudicate in the future. I guess that's a good thing, but a difficult thing.

"We were really pleased with the response, and that members nominated and recognized the work that their colleagues did and put their names forward."

The inaugural recipient

On behalf of HSA, Stewart congratulated Bev Banfield, the first recipient of the David Bland Memorial Award. "Bev has set a high bar for this award," she said. "Bev is a worthy recipient, and I congratulate her whole-heartedly.

"Bev was nominated by her colleagues, who are obviously very grateful for the efforts she's put into a very difficult issue. She deserves all of our thanks - and our sincere congratulations."

Katie Hammer, a laboratory technologist at Mission Memorial Hospital and one of Banfield's nominators, was personally affected in the cancer cluster: Hammer is a cancer survivor, one of the first diagnosed in the lab.

"I'm so grateful for Bev's work. She stepped in and advocated for us," Hammer said. "She has been instrumental in getting the investigation going, and keeping it on track."

In her nomination, Hammer details Banfield's work in identifying and investigating the problem. Starting in 2003 with a letter-writing campaign to various employer representatives, Banfield then chaired a subcommittee of the hospital's safety committee formed to deal with the investigation and subsequent recommendations.

Banfield has personally sorted through boxes of old hospital records, been interviewed by the local press and media, and always kept fellow members informed about developments.

"She has even collected her own samples when the air ducts were being cleaned and management would not do any testing," Hammer said.

"Bev started four years ago, and is still leading the charge. Thanks in part to Bev, the employer is now working with the BC Cancer Agency to determine if the cluster includes not just employees from the lab, but from the whole facility.

"Even without the award, she's got our eternal gratitude for all her hard work and passion," Hammer said.

The concluding words of Hammer's nomination are also the most telling. After a closely-written page describing Banfield's work, Hammer writes: "I hope this will convince everyone that Bev Banfield has met and exceeded the criteria for the David Bland Award. She is not only an effective role model and advocate, but she has gone above and beyond her role as OH&S steward. She has done so much that words alone are not enough." 

Do you know a colleague whose advocacy and activism deserve recognition? Contact The Report!

In 2007, this article won the Canadian Association of Labour Media's national "Muckraking Award" for a communications initiative that exposes anti-union or anti-social practice.

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