

BULLETIN

Award recognizes health and safety leader

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Radiation technologist Allen Peters will keep advocating for safety in the workplace

by LAURA BUSHEIKIN

ALTHOUGH HE APPRECIATES receiving this years David Bland Award for outstanding advocacy in occupational health and safety, HSA member Allen Peters has no intention of resting on his laurels.

In fact, for Peters, the award was a poignant reminder of the pressing need to keep advocating and educating to make workplaces safer.

-It was an emotional moment for me, because I know the award wouldnt exist if someone hadnt lost their life in a work-related incident," says Peters, a medical radiation technologist at Nicola Valley General Hospital.

The award, presented to Peters at HSAs April convention, was created to commemorate David Bland, a vocational counsellor who worked at Richmond Mental Health Services. At the end of an otherwise ordinary workday in January 2005, Bland was stabbed to death in the parking lot by a former client.

-The incident is still very much in our minds," says Peters. -You think of yourself as being fairly safe in health care ... yes, we have injuries but you dont think theyll be fatalities. So when there was a fatal injury, it sent a big message to the health care industry."

A dramatic incident can be a wake-up call, says Peter, but ensuring workplace safety is an ongoing, everyday process. -We need to continue to be vigilant, to stay informed, and to make sure programs are in place and people are accountable for their actions."

Peters has been doing just that for the last 20 years. It was a dramatic incident that motivated him to get involved in OHS activism.

-What started the whole ball rolling for me was the day I lost one of my co-workers in my department. It happened in a split second." The co-worker was injured while assisting a patient off an x-ray table and ended up on long-term disability.

-She had always really enjoyed her work and went from being an active contributor to health care to having her career wiped out in the flash of a moment," says Peters.

Peters sat on an OHS Committee when he was an HSA member at large for Region 8 and then went on to serve as co-chair for the Thompson Regional Joint Committee for Occupational Health and Safety. -It was the first committee that was overseeing operations at 11 different sites. We were looking at how to consolidate and not duplicate what was being done," says Peters.

Peters has worked in -virtually all positions possible in our health and safety structure," according to HSA

President Reid Johnson, who presented him with his award. These days, he is perhaps best known around BC as an educator for OHSAH (The Occupational Health and Safety Agency for Healthcare in BC), which he has been doing since the OHSAH program was established in 1999.

This position takes Peters all over BC to deliver two OHS programs ... an introduction to OHS roles and responsibilities, and an advanced session.

-HSA can take pride in the fact that of all the facilitators have come and gone there are two originals who were there at the beginning and continue to deliver, and thats me and [HSA member activist] Jackie Spain, who received last years David Bland Award," says Peters.

Peters has been delivering these workshops for 10 years and has no plans to stop. He enjoys witnessing, again and again, the power of education.

-The concept is that knowledge is power and if we empower people to understand their rights and responsibilities around OHS they can do a better job at their own worksite," says Peters.

Contributing to a safer workplace is easy, he says.

-Its not complex. It starts with you. A good first step is to take an interest in the subject. Find out who the safety leaders are in your workplace and talk to them. Find out what its about. A lot of workers dont know what their rights and responsibilities are in the workplace, so start with the basics: you have the right to know, the right to participate, the right to refuse unsafe work. Get a better understanding of what that means."

If all you do is educate yourself, you are already making a difference, he says. -When you learn more you will be in a better position to keep yourself safe and that will rub off on other people around you."

OHS PROVIDES A GREAT starting point for union members to get involved, says Peters. -It has no political pegs attached to it; you are supporting every worker in the workplace. Its not about "us and them but about us, in this all together seeking a solution. It allows people to contribute in a meaningful way in the workplace.

-And HSA does a very good job supporting safety activists by providing a solid base of training. And HSA recently produced an A-1 safety manual and put it on a memory stick so that anyone can plug it into their computer and have instant access to read about policies and procedures. HSA really stands behind the idea of education.

-I really want to give a special thank-you to all the HSA people whove come before me in terms of how much theyve supported the OHS programs. Jackie Spain in particular has been a very sound leader over the years," he says.

The establishment of the David Bland award is another way HSA shows its support for OHS advocates. Although Peters makes it clear that he is not looking for personal rewards for his activism, he does very much appreciate the award.

-When I travel across the province delivering workshops I sometimes come across people who were Davids coworkers and I talk about the award; they always say thank you so much for doing that. Its very meaningful to honour his memory and keep his name alive in this way." 

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