

BULLETIN

Breakthrough ruling on multiple-chemical sensitivities

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Appeal ruling recognizes condition affecting people exposed to workplace chemicals

LENORE WAS SHOPPING AT RONA with her husband when it happened. She can't remember the details, but she blacked out completely, and later was found wandering around in a confused state. Staff paged her husband to come help her.

Lenore (not her real name), is an imaging technologist at a large BC hospital. Back in the mid 90s, she was one of the first people in the province to work with the revolutionary new Magnetic Resonance Imaging machines that were appearing at that time. She, along with five other women, spent hours each day in a small room alongside the MRI unit, operating the computer console that ran the MRI machine and working with patients.

After about a year and a half, Lenore and the other women started to realize there was something wrong. Previously healthy, they developed asthma and other breathing problems, flushing of the skin, watery, itchy eyes, dermatitis, rosacea, gastrointestinal tract problems and periodic cognitive impairment or "brain fog".

"An investigation revealed that a ventilation system intended to expel fumes from the film processor was actually blowing the fumes directly from the developing machine into the small room in which they sat," says Sarah O'Leary, an HSA WCB advocate.

The exposure left all six women acutely and permanently reactive to developing chemicals. They continue to work, but their careers have been significantly limited. While their own hospital accommodated them by removing film from their work area as much as possible and by prohibiting the use of scents of any kind, they have had to avoid going into hospitals where film continues to be exposed. As a board member with the Canadian Association of Medical Radiation Technologists, Lenore sets exams but can't actually enter many of the imaging areas her students work in because of the chemicals and exposure to film.

But the problem doesn't stay at work. As Lenore discovered that day at Rona, she and the other women are suffering from multiple chemical sensitivity (MCS), a condition that leaves individuals sensitive to a variety of everyday chemicals ... not just the ones involved in the original exposure. As a result, the six women can and do have severe reactions whenever they are exposed to scents or fumes of any kind. For example, when they board airplanes they must be cautious not to sit beside anyone who is wearing cologne. Other chemicals can affect them when at crowded events, in theatres, or visiting hardware stores. Building or road repairs may emit tar or other toxic fumes which will trigger a whole array of reactions.

HSA has raised the issue of MCS for years because many members have had these exposures while operating the high tech equipment used in imaging.

Working with HSA, the women fought for years to appeal the WCB decision to deny their chemical sensitivity. In 2006, after three days of oral hearing at the Workers Compensation Appeal Tribunal (WCAT), the WCAT

accepted their sensitivity to film processing chemicals. But it still refused to accept MCS and cover their reactions to other chemicals outside the workplace.

-The WCB has fought this tooth and nail, but now, if they get sick at the workplace due to film processing chemicals, the WCB covers them," says OLeary. -The big question remains: what if you black out at Rona due to exposure to fumes there, fall down and break your leg?"

HSA hasn't given up, pursuing a second round of appeals for each of the women, and a recent breakthrough leaves room for optimism, explains OLeary. In the past year, three of the HSA members have won appeals to have their MCS accepted as a consequence of the original exposure to processing chemicals at work. One more is awaiting her WCAT decision and two have lost the MCS appeals.

-This is very significant because those who have their MCS accepted should now be covered if they are exposed to something outside the workplace," says OLeary.

Progress is slow, but steady, she explains, comparing the MSC fight to early skepticism about latex allergies.

-I remember when I started doing this work the WCB scoffed at latex allergy. They said it's all in their heads. It takes a long time before it's formally recognized as a diagnosis, and we're getting there. We've come a long way in the last 20 years in terms of recognition of MCS." 

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