Louise Hall/Patty Deline

The Occupant's View


KEY WORDS: Tight Building Syndrome

It was in 1978 that my Union, the Public Service Alliance of Canada, first became involved with the large complex in Hull, Les Terrasses de la Chaudiere. Since then our health and safety section has become increasingly involved with the quality of air in buildings and its effects on workers' health.

Our main role is to assist members who suffer on a daily basis from a variety of health problems directly related to poor air in their workplaces. Assistance is provided through education on health and safety rights, information on workplace hazards, filing grievances, developing contract language to improve protection and claiming Workers' Compensation.

At the national level, our Union has been pressing for standards on Indoor Air Quality, for a standardized protocol for investigating problem buildings, for increased research and for the recognition of Tight Building Syndrome as a compensable work-related disease.

Workers' concerns in this last decade have led our section to focus on two important issues: the health of occupants in sick buildings and the violation of workers' health and safety rights provided in Canadian legislation.

The health concerns include: complaints and health problems related to poor air quality are still not taken seriously; the unknown long-term health effects of years of exposure to low levels of pollutants many of which are known or suspected carcinogens; the unknown synergistic effects of mixtures of pollutants routinely found in office environments; the difficulty in obtaining information about the buildings; and the lack of recognition on occupational disease schedules of Tight Building Syndrome. Workers have to use sick leave, or leave without pay, and in some cases, quit their jobs because of the seriousness of their health problems.

Another important issue is that basic workers' occupational health and safety rights are being violated or ignored. These rights include: the right to know the hazards of their work environment, the right to participate in the day to day investigation, evaluation and reduction of hazards in their workplaces, and the right to refuse work in conditions known or believed to present a danger to their health. Workplace air quality problems have reached epidemic proportions and must be given top priority in this country. Though standards are desperately needed, our Union believes a more holistic approach is required. For instance, one major agency should be established to take the initiative and be given responsibility for indoor air quality research and action in this country. The initial task should be to develop a protocol for investigating problem buildings with attention to occupant complaints.

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This new body should also undertake to sponsor and co-ordinate research into indoor air quality problems. We need to know what constitutes a health-promoting and enhancing environment for building occupants.

The result of such research should form the basis of national standards, legally enforced, to ensure the health and safety of all workers including those in office environments.

Though the Keynote speaker proposes an interesting and innovative approach to measure the performance of a building or facility taking into account the interactions of the occupants and their environment, we strongly believe that the emphasis must be on the health of occupants. The performance of buildings must be assessed with the aim of identifying the necessary corrective measures to allow occupants to carry on a productive working life in a healthy environment.