

HEALTH HAZARDS IN THE HEALTH SERVICE

Many people think that workers in the health services should know how to protect their own health, because that is the field they are trained in. But, in fact, most workers in the health service are not professionals, and do not get trained in recognising health hazards or how to protect their health on the job. One worker put it this way: "If you've ever wondered how people can manage to work with the sick and stay healthy themselves, the answer is that they can't."

This article lists some of the most common health hazards in the health service and suggests some ways of how to deal with unsafe conditions. There is no easy solution to problems of health and safety at work. Dealing with these problems in an appropriate and effective way requires strong union organisation. In other countries, and in some factories in South Africa, workers have elected safety representatives within their unions. The task of these safety representatives is to monitor health and safety at the workplace and bring them to the attention of the union as a whole, so that the worker representatives can then take up these problems with management.

Working in hot conditions

Workers in kitchens, laundries and boiler rooms often have to work in hot conditions. If the air gets too hot, workers may suffer from heat stress.

The signs of heat stress are:

- faster heart beat and pulse
- tiredness
- nausea (feeling sick)
- moist skin
- fainting
- low blood pressure
- higher body temperature
- muscle cramps

If heat stress is not treated in time, it may develop into heat stroke, which is very serious.

Workers need to be told how to recognise signs of heat stress. They can demand, through their union, that machines for ventilation and cooling are installed. The risk of heat stress is less if workers are allowed to rest away from the heat.

Working with chemicals

Chemicals are being used

- in the boiler house
- in the laundry (detergents, disinfectants, bleach) and in dry cleaning processes (solvents)
- in sterilisation processes (disinfectants) (affecting cleaning, kitchen, and laundry staff)
- in cleaning materials and detergents (disinfectants, scouring powder, bleach)
- in the laboratories
- in the operating theatres
- in ambulances
- in the hospital gardens (herbicides, pesticides) (affecting gardeners)
- in the workshops (degreasing agents, epoxy, glues) (affecting building workers and workshop assistants)

People often complain about the short-term effects that chemicals have on them, such as:

- nausea (feeling sick)
- loss of appetite
- breathing trouble
- skin irritation and/or inflammation of the skin
- suffocation
- irritability
- numbness of limbs
- tiredness
- blurred vision
- nose and throat irritation
- headaches
- drowsiness



Chemical solvents used in dry cleaning can cause nausea, confusion, fatigue and dizziness! . . .

The long-term effects are even more serious, and more difficult to find out. They may include:

- liver damage
- cancer
- heart disease
- lung disease
- kidney disease
- blood damage
- bone marrow damage
- nervous system damage
- reproductive hazards (miscarriages, damage to babies before birth)

Working with chemicals of any kind requires many safety precautions. Measures must be taken against spilling and leaking of chemicals. Chemicals must be stored safely so that they do not become a fire hazard. In working with chemicals, it is important to see that there is enough flow of fresh air.

Hazardous chemicals are not just liquids. They can also be dusts, pastes, droplets, powders or vapours. They can cause damage by entering the body through the mouth and nose when the person is breathing or swallowing.

Workers should demand to know what chemicals they are working with. For some of these chemicals, there is a legal exposure limit. The union and other organisations can help in finding out whether the chemicals used at the workplace go over the legal limit.

The union can also arrange for independent health checks. Health checks in themselves do not prevent ill-health; they just find some of the signs of illness early, and therefore make the treatment more likely to be successful.

The kind of health checks for the effects of chemicals may involve blood and urine tests, as well as tests of the lung, liver, and kidney functions.

Working with gases

Different kinds of gases are used for medical research and laboratory work, in operating theatres, and for industrial work in the workshops and in the boiler rooms.

Most gases are safe if they are contained in cylinders, valves, or pipes. They become dangerous to workers if they leak. They have health effects similar to those of chemicals.

Workers who handle or use gases should be properly trained and should be told about the possible hazards.

To prevent gases from leaking, the cylinders must be safely stored, handled with great care, and checked regularly. Damaged cylinders must be sent back to the supply company immediately.

For gases used in the operating theatre, extractors are

available which suck up any extra gas. But even with these machines, a good air flow is important.

Hospital staff exposed to gases should have regular health checks.

Removing waste

Clinical waste can be poisonous, infectious, and dangerous. It includes:

- Human or animal tissue or excretions
- Drugs and medical products
- Swabs and dressings
- Instruments

Training of waste removers is very important, for it is necessary to know which wastes are removed in what way. All precautions should be taken to make sure that the waste does not spill. Workers should be taught what to do if, by accident, some waste does spill.

Hand hazards

With the kinds of materials - chemicals, waste, etc. - that many hospital workers have to handle, any cut or injury to their hands can be very serious; for they can easily pick up any infection from the materials that they handle. Bacteria and viruses could enter through the cut and spread through the body.

Hospital workers may get cuts from broken ampoules, scalpels, broken bottles or scissors and other sharp things that were not disposed in the proper way.

To prevent this, all sharp things must be disposed in boxes, which must then be sealed and marked properly.

Infection hazards

All hospital workers who have contact with infected patients, such as

- nursing infected patients
- cleaning the rooms of infected patients
- transporting them
- transporting and cleaning their linen
- taking, transporting and examining samples of their tissue or blood

are at risk, for they might get infected themselves.

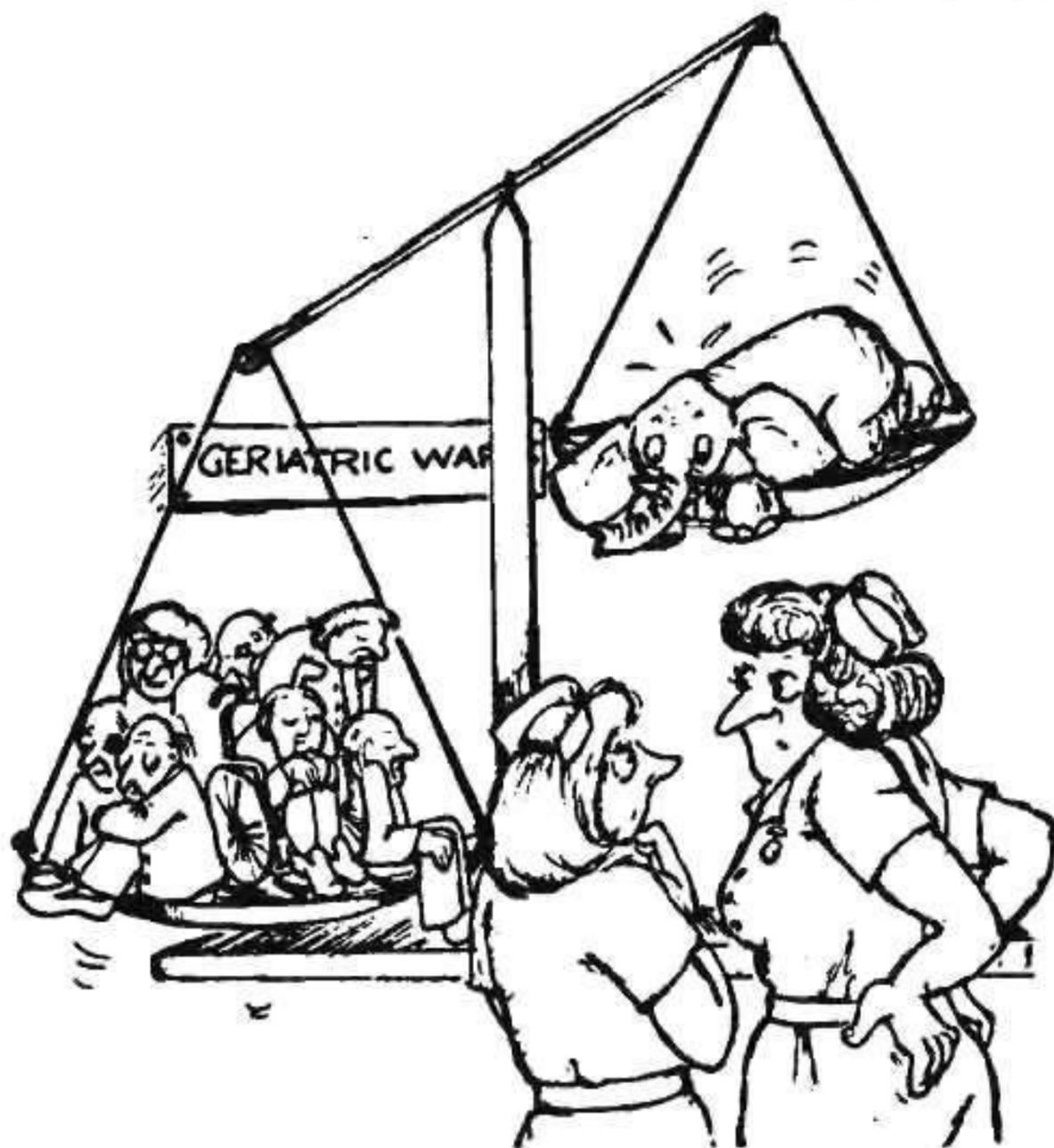
They therefore should demand the right to know what disease has infected the patient. It is necessary to mark all rooms, samples, linen, or waste bags. Workers who have to do these jobs should be told about how they can keep contact with infectious bacteria or viruses to an absolute minimum. They should have the option of free immunisation where there is a risk of infection. They can be immunised against TB, German measles, polio, tetanus, typhoid, jaundice, flu, diphtheria, and rabies.

Infection is particularly dangerous to pregnant women; for many diseases are known to cause birth defects or miscarriages (for instance German measles, shingles, chicken pox, infectious jaundice, mumps).

Lifting, back pain, back injuries

Nurses, sister, assistants, porters, ambulance workers and other hospital workers have to lift things, materials, and patients who are unable to move themselves. People who lift heavy weights for a long time are likely to suffer from back pain or back injuries. It is therefore important to cut down on the stress put on the back day by day.

This can be done by providing enough hoists, trolleys, and other wheeled carriers, and enough space within which these mechanical aids can be used (for instance in toilets, bathrooms, etc.). Secondly, there must be enough trained staff to do lifting and handling jobs, so that it is not one worker alone who has to carry a heavy weight at any one time. Thirdly, hospital staff must be trained in easy ways to lift and handle weights.



In the course of one hours work, two nurses on a geriatric ward lifted the equivalent of TWO AND A HALF TONS!!! . . .

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) has recommended the following maximum weight limits for frequent lifting without mechanical aids:

Age	Men	Women
16-18	31,50 lbs (15 kg)	19,12 lbs (9 kg)
18-20	38,25 lbs (19 kg)	23,25 lbs (11 kg)
20-25	41,25 lbs (20 kg)	24,75 lbs (12 kg)
35-50	34,50 lbs (17 kg)	21,75 lbs (10 kg)
over50	26,25 lbs (13 kg)	16,50 lbs (8 kg)

Many other things have to be taken into account, such as how often the weight is lifted, what shape the weight is, whether it is flexible or not and what position and posture workers have to take to lift the weight. The Health and Safety Commission in Britain has suggested that employers should provide mechanical aids for weights between 35 lbs (17 kg) and 75 lbs (37 kg).

Noise

Hospitals should be quiet and restful places in which to work. But certain jobs and certain areas of work can be very noisy, and may even be a hazard to hearing.

These include:

- laundries
- workshops
- pressure steam sterilisers
- machines used by gardeners

To find out whether there is a noise problem and what to do about it, the union organising workers in the hospital can arrange to have a noise survey done.

Shiftwork and stress

With the 24-hour service that hospitals provide, many hospital workers have to work shifts. Shiftwork disrupts the body's natural rhythm of eating, sleeping, working, etc. Shiftworkers, especially nightworkers, have less sleep, and the sleep is often of poor quality. As a result, they are tired and irritable most of the time, and with increased tiredness, the accident rate goes up. Shiftwork and the stress that goes with it will lower the body's ability to cope with toxic materials and physically demanding conditions (such as heat or cold).

To lower the stress of shiftwork, workers should press for the following changes:

- shorter working hours
- longer holidays
- organise shifts so that new workers or workers returning have longer breaks to get used to shiftwork
- good canteen and rest room facilities
- provision of transport for shiftworkers who start or finish during unsocial hours
- lowering of shiftworkers' exposure to noise, heat or cold, toxic materials and other hazards.

The union organising workers in your hospital or clinic can arrange to find out about all these hazards and their effects, and, together with worker representatives, workers worried about their health and safety at work, can decide on a plan of action.

If you, as a health worker, would like any more information or advice on any of these work-related health problems, you can contact the General and Allied Workers' Union at any one of the following addresses:

WEST RAND: GAWU
 P.O. Box 43
 P.O. Kagiso
 1744

JOHANNESBURG: The Secretary
 GAWU
 P.O. Box 61954
 Marshalltown
 Johannesburg

or:

The Secretary
P.O. Box 7549
Johannesburg

or:

GAWU
20 Tudor Mansions(4th floor)
78 Troye Street
Johannesburg

Health workers in Natal are being organised by the Health and Allied Workers' Union (HAWU). HAWU is an affiliate of the National Federation of Workers.

Street address: NFW
15 Ecumenical Centre
20 St Andrews Street
Durban
4001

Postal address: NFW
P.O. Box 47011
Greyville
47011

Tel. (031)306-3993

Health Workers in the Cape are being organised by the General Workers' Union (GWU).

Street address: 11 Benbow Building
Beverly Street
Athlone
Cape Town

Tel. (021)638-2592