Don’t Teach my Mother WHMIS

My mom works in a highly hazardous occupation. She belongs to a class of workers who are the most injured in British Columbia. According to WorkSafeBC’s 2020 annual report, people in her line of work are commonly injured during interactions with the people they care for. That’s right, my mom isn’t a lobster fisher or a steep-slope tree faller. She is a health care assistant (HCA).

She has been one for more than twenty years. During that time, she has mainly worked as a home support worker; visiting the homes of the elderly to assist with things that they cannot do for themselves. It is a crucially important yet mostly thankless job.

“Why are they making me take WHMIS training at sixty-six years old?”

When I last spoke to my mom, she complained to me about a WHMIS test she had just endured. WHMIS, for those outside Canada, stands for Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System. WHMIS can be a dry topic even by safety training standards. It’s especially dry when presented as training material to workers. It becomes downright painful when those workers must endure such training year after year for the duration of their careers.

“Why are they making me take WHMIS training at sixty-six years old?” My mom asked.

“What hazardous products do you use at work?” I asked, not dropping my safety-guy persona. Not even for my mother.

“None.”

No hazardous products? *Really?* “Not even a household cleaner?” I asked.

It turns out she used to use a cleaner when she worked in one of the care facilities, but no longer. So, why put her through annual WHMIS training? Does our OHS Regulation require it? As it turns out BC Regulation does require that workers are trained in general WHMIS training *as it pertains to the workplace.* Ah, Regulation, thou art so pragmatic! *As it pertains to the workplace!* If she didn’t handle, use or store any hazardous products throughout her work then it is likely that much of the information she was receiving did not *pertain* to her workplace.

Training that Misses the Mark

I asked my mom what she learned in the training. Well, she had already known that the skull and crossbones guy was bad. The bony hand was bad too. Good start, I thought. But then she said that she could not remember the categories… there were categories and there were elements… or were they called sections? There were sixteen of them… but there might have been eleven… And so it went. She struggled to remember those kinds of details. As she described her learning experience, I wondered why these bits of information stood out for her. She spoke about the number of sections in a Safety Data Sheet but she said nothing about the chemicals she might encounter through her work, nothing about hazards she might face, and nothing about how she should protect herself. The sections! The course designer wanted to emphasize those sections.

What kind of mind was behind this? I pictured an authoritarian figure sitting behind an oak desk laughing maniacally as they ticked the "required" box next to the annual WHMIS training field in their training matrix. The fingertips of each hand touching each other as they thought about the hundreds of workers struggling to remember the number of sections in a Safety Data Sheet. Minus the colourful imagery, this probably isn't too far off from how the decision to make this type of WHMIS training an annual requirement was made.

Now, I don't want to throw my mom's employer under the bus. She doesn't need that, and they really aren't doing anything that much different from what everyone else is doing. We've all sat through this type of general instruction. It's pervasive in workplaces and drives employees mad. It also produces cynicism.

OHS Knowledge needs to be Demonstrated

The thing is, it's also difficult to make a rational argument to support this type of training. OHS Regulations don't generally require employers to ensure that their employees know that there are sixteen sections in a safety data sheet. WorkSafeBC's publication, *WHMIS 2015: At Work*, states that worker education is demonstrated when workers know how a hazardous product they use at work can hurt them, how they should protect themselves, what they should do in an emergency, and where they should get more information. Indeed, take part in a regulatory inspection and you will likely hear a similar line of questioning when the officer speaks to a worker using a hazardous product. The type of training my mom received was not designed to ensure that she could answer those questions.

I understand the temptation behind offering generalized training. It's easy to distribute and it's easy to track. But, by trying to train everyone, employers can end up training no one. What about those other hazards health care assistants are exposed to? What sort of training did my mom receive to help her avoid those hazards that result in health care assistants being the most injured workers in British Columbia? Mom says that the violence in the workplace training she has taken part in boiled down to being told to leave if a client shows signs of aggression. That doesn't seem like perfect training, but it's at least a strategy that she can apply to her work.

Changing how we think of Competence

If a business wants to be seen as acting sincerely, it would be wise to consider the

effect that overly generalized training has on how workers perceive safety. Generalized training says we want to check the box. But often the check box is also missed because while the worker knows how many sections there are on an SDS, they do not know what to do if they get the product in their eyes.

At the end of the day, training needs should be assessed before training is prescribed to workers. If training is intended to fill a knowledge gap, go back and check that the gap has been filled. Our OHS regulator shows us how they do it; they ask good questions. Don’t simply look for a box to be checked or a form to be signed, get out there and talk to employees where they are working. Ask them questions and help make sure they have answers to the most important ones.

Source: David Dunham

David Dunham has been a safety professional for 10 years. David started in the profession as a consultant, instructor and instructional designer. He has worked as an OHS regulatory officer and most recently as a Senior Safety Advisor, representing the owner on a large infrastructure project. David is a Canadian Registered Safety Professional and an avid student of contemporary safety science. David’s passion for safety is ignited by applying pragmatic solutions to safety challenges. He believes that good communication is a cornerstone of good safety performance and he explores methods of communicating safety concepts using humour, creative writing, story-telling and audio-visual representations. He believes that safety can be boring, but it doesn’t need to be.