



In plain sight

By Heather Prime



It takes less than a minute to don safety goggles – and a millisecond to do permanent damage without them. Here’s how to keep employee eye safety at the top of the chart.

Flying debris from grinding, drilling, and sawing. A chemical splash. A spray of bloodborne pathogens. Intense light from welding and electrical arcs. And, yes, even sunrays. These are just a few of the hazards that put workers’ vision at risk every day. The hazards are many and diverse and they can be found on worksites in a broad spectrum of industries, from manufacturing and construction to food processing and hospitality.

Between 2003 and 2007, WorkSafeBC accepted more than 3,600 disability claims for eye injuries, costing the insurer \$3.6 million. The cost, of course, to the injured workers – almost all of whom are men and almost half of whom are younger than 34 years of age – is immeasurable.

Dr. Jeffrey Mann, an optometrist working in Fernie, has met his fair share of these workers. “I see work-related eye injuries at least a few times weekly,” he says, “especially metallic or mineral foreign bodies embedded in the cornea.”

Based on his experience, Dr. Mann says significant eye injuries often occur at the end of the day, when workers are cleaning up and putting away equipment. “High-pressure hoses and tools like nail guns are handled without eye protection because the perception of risk is lower. And the workers are tired and eager to make their way home.” Unfortunately, Dr. Mann says his practice is always a busy one, owing to a common perception that eye protection is both a burden and an unnecessary hassle.

An organization with a vision

Brad Waghorn has his own unique perspective on the problem. “Try eating blind,” he says. “It’s much more difficult than it sounds.” Waghorn should know. He’s the northern B.C./Yukon regional manager for the CNIB (Canadian National Institute for the Blind), an organization that works in partnership with WorkSafeBC. And, owing to a degenerative condition known as optic nerve atrophy, he is partially blind as well.

Safety glasses provide an effective block for the deadly damage caused by nail guns (WorkSafeBC archival photo).

“We need employers and workers scrutinizing their eye safety practices in the harsh light of day, every day, if we want to prevent more eye injuries.”

– Brad Waghorn, CNIB B.C./Yukon regional manager

Waghorn is the brainchild behind CNIB’s new industrial eye safety workshops. Based in his Prince George office, he developed these workshops several years ago in response to the plight of two young men, former mine and mill workers, who’d lost their vision as a result of workplace injuries. When these two workers came to Waghorn for assistance, they were devastated by their losses, and each faced a lengthy rehabilitation.

“Working with these fellows resurfaced all

the fear, anxiety, and frustration I had to deal with as my condition blinded me,” he recalls. “But what really struck me was that these men were suffering for no good reason. Their vision loss was entirely preventable.”

The 90-minute CNIB workshops educate workers about eye safety and motivate them to follow safe work practices using hard-hitting techniques, including scare-stories, graphic photos, and interactive exercises. To simulate the experience of

losing their eyesight, for instance, workers don blinders and attempt to do a series of straightforward activities. They discover, for instance, simple tasks such as counting change or placing toothpaste on a toothbrush aren’t so simple any more.

“The exercises remind us how fragile we are as human beings, and how quickly something can be taken away from us,” Waghorn says. “But they’re not enough.”

“Among working-age adults, only 25 percent who’ve had eye injuries are

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employed. We need employers and workers scrutinizing their eye safety practices in the harsh light of day, every day, if we want to prevent more eye injuries.”

Scott McMillan, health and safety advisor for the City of Prince George, agrees. He’s invited CNIB to offer several eye-safety workshops over the past couple of years, after recognizing some employees’ tendency to be too lax about wearing protective gear. “Employers can provide the gear, make it comfortable, available, and ensure workers are wearing it. But we’ve had a hard time motivating workers to do so,” he says. “These workshops make us feel we’re getting the message out on a more emotional level.”

Turning a blind eye is costly

Andrew Lim, a WorkSafeBC occupational safety officer, says some employers ignore eye safety at a high cost. “Accidents are expensive,” he explains. “There are the direct costs like increased premiums, damaged equipment, and materials, and many indirect costs, including lost time, training of replacement workers, loss of reputation, and drop in employee morale.”

In addition to considering introducing their employees to eye-safety workshops such as those provided by CNIB, Lim says employers should focus on developing and maintaining a well thought out, on-the-job program that includes the following:

- A thorough risk assessment of hazards from the obvious (flying particles) to the not-so-obvious (bloodborne pathogens or UVA/UVB sun rays)
- Involvement of the joint health and safety committee
- Training of workers on the hazards and risks for eye injuries, the purpose of safety eyewear, and the proper use and maintenance of safety eyewear to avoid nuisances, such as fogging and scratches
- Testing the fit on eyewear to ensure protection, comfort, and use
- Providing workers a choice of stylish, safety eyewear to build buy-in and ensure use
- Supervision of workers to ensure they’re using safety eyewear as required, including during clean-up

Eye safety at a glance

Safety glasses

Provide minimum protection. Best suited for general working conditions involving such hazards as dust, chips, or flying particles.

Goggles

Suitable for higher impact hazards, as well as dust, acid, or chemical-splash protection. Molded goggles are best for workers continually exposed to splash or fine dust.

Face shields

Provide highest impact protection and shelter from spraying, chipping, grinding, chemicals, and bloodborne hazards. A face shield should never be worn without safety glasses or goggles.

Look up these sites today

www.cnib.ca for more on CNIB’s industrial eye safety workshops

www.ovp.bc.ca to choose an optometrist for fitting safety eyewear

WorkSafeBC.com to order the latest WorkSafeBC eye-safety video, *Look at Me*

