

Introduction

Out of all work environments, hospitals and healthcare organizations are one of the most significant workplaces with a large proportion of vulnerable population. A safe work environment in hospitals is essential for best practice clinical learning, enhancement of patient outcomes, and provision of quality care facilities. It helps in increasing the overall productivity of work and reducing costs related to medical claims, turnover, and workers' compensation. Maintaining a safe work environment in hospitals helps avoid unintentional injuries and psychological stress through timely and appropriate interventions. A hospital is a high pressure environment with varied demands across different regions in Australia and there are large variances in the approach to providing better conditions in hospitals. Approaches vary with jurisdiction in the particular region and the governing body that makes and updates policies for providing a safe working environment in hospitals (Australian Medical Association, 2015).

This case study aims to throw light on the various government and non-profit organizations in Australia that create policies for work health and safety procedures and risk assessment in hospitals. It will also cover the work health safety assessment of one of the hospitals in the region, providing recommendations for managing risk for vulnerable populations and resolving the work safety risks identified.

Commonwealth and State Occupational Health and Safety Laws

As per the Occupational Health and Safety Act 2000 (NSW), hospital operators owe it to their employees to ensure their health, safety, and welfare at the workplace. Some of the health and safety risks that are covered for the healthcare industry include injuries associated with lifting patients or equipment; verbal abuse, aggression, and harassment by staff or patients at the workplace; injuries caused due to stress and fatigue; and injuries caused through biohazards such as needles. In order to ensure that these risks are removed or reduced in hospitals, it is mandatory for all hospital owners to follow best practices (Ball, 2010). Some of these are listed below:

- Ensure that the hospital premises have restricted access and are safe from risks and potential health injuries
- Ensure that the equipment, medicines, or other substances provided for use by hospital employees are safe and without risks, and the employees are adequately trained on their appropriate usage
- Ensure that the work environment and systems of work is safe for the employees
- Provide detailed documentation, information, training, and supervision to ensure that best practices pertaining to workplace safety are being followed at all times
- Ensure that adequate facilities are being provided to promote the welfare of employees at the workplace (Ball, 2010)

As per the workplace safety laws of New South Wales, managing directors and other key stakeholders of hospitals are held liable in case any occupational health and safety law is found to be breached (Ball, 2010).

Australian Medical Association (AMA)

The Australian Medical Association (AMA) is a professional association that aims to reissue or update policies developed by the Australian government that they consider ill-informed or poorly targeted. The AMA promotes a safe work environment in hospitals along three areas – system, physical, and personal safety. As per the guidelines developed and issued by the AMA, hospitals need to demonstrate an unwavering commitment to the health and safety of their employees and have a system where the potential of an unsafe work environment can be truly recognized and documented. Some of the issues that need to be addressed in hospital policies include handling grievances, discrimination and aggression, prevention of injuries, infection control, hazard identification, and crisis management. Hospitals need to clearly articulate responsibilities for a safe work environment to responsible persons including their training and ability to take up accountability for their actions. All staff should be given adequate information and training on identifying hazards in the workplace and reporting it to the concerned authorities (Australian Medical Association, 2015).

The AMA has issued several requirements to classify a hospital as safe to work. These are outlined below:

- *Physical safety* – Ensure compliance with policies, introduce new products and technologies that are safer compared to their earlier counterparts, provide detailed documentation regarding workplace safety, promote good fatigue management practices, develop a physical layout of the hospital that promotes a safe work environment, and provide access to safety systems such as protective equipment for the safety of the employees (Australian Medical Association, 2015)
- *Personal safety* – Promote zero tolerance policies for aggression and harassment in the workplace, promote a no-blame culture in the hospital, and provide professional counseling and mentorship (Australian Medical Association, 2015)

Case Study

In order to probe the quality of work environment in Australian hospitals, an extensive work health safety assessment was carried out for a public hospital in the rural area. The objective of this assessment was to identify workplace hazards and estimate risks for employees and patients in the workplace.

Occupational hazards in a hospital setting can be broadly categorized into four groups (Tziaferi et al., 2011). These include:

- *Physical* – extremes of temperature, radiation, vibrations, and noise
- *Chemical* – solids, liquids, and vapour
- *Biological* – bacteria, fungi, and viruses
- *Psychological* – psychological stress and social stress

A comprehensive risk assessment of the chosen hospital was carried out through direct observation and by conducting one-on-one interviews with the hospital staff. In several instances, the level of risk of a particular situation noted through direct observation was underestimated by the staff, showing a possible lack of information and training of the staff.

These types of instances contribute to increase in workplace safety risks as employees are not adequately trained to identify and report potential hazards to the concerned authorities.

The hazards that were identified in the hospital through both direct observation and discussions with the employees are summarized below.

1. Insufficient priority for health and safety of hospital employees

A culture of accepting workplace health and safety risks was identified with employees being complacent about reporting potential hazards. Adequate training material and best practices documentation were unavailable for the hospital staff members to promote compliance at the workplace. The training programs given to new recruits were not sufficient to cover all potential hazards at the workplace, and reporting systems using which they could adequately report potential risk factors. Managers of the hospital were not held accountable for promoting health and safety in the workplace. They failed to set regular reporting standards to encourage employees to report any untoward instances at the workplace immediately.

2. Increased risk of musculoskeletal injuries

Based on direct interviews with the hospital staff, a considerable number of workers report chronic back pain due to work-related stress. When activities that could lead to acute and chronic musculoskeletal injuries were observed at the workplace, it was noticed that workers maintained a poor posture while lifting patients and heavy equipment which could easily strain the muscles in the neck, shoulders, and back. When hospital policies were probed regarding these types of high-risk activities, it was observed that hospital workers were not given adequate training in the right method to carry out these activities leading to high occupational risks to health.

3. Increased risk of exposure to infectious agents

Based on observation, there were several activities that hospital workers performed that could expose them to harmful infectious agents from patients. Some of these activities include priming IV tubing, transferring medications from one container to another, touching equipment

that may be contaminated, handling patient samples, and removing syringes from a port. Non-compliance with regulations while performing these routine tasks can expose workers to harmful pathogens as well as medications such as anti-cancer drugs or hormone therapy which could lead to allergic reactions in hospital workers. Several instances were identified when workers failed to use extensive measures to protect themselves from exposure, such as using gloves or protective clothing.

Based on the above noted observations, the following recommendations are proposed to increase awareness and compliance among the hospital staff.

- **Availability of adequate training programs and best practices manuals**

The hospital managers need to consult the appropriate healthcare organization that can help them formulate training material for new recruits as well as annual training programs for all hospital workers for review of best practices. This training material needs to concentrate on all possible ways to avoid workplace injury including best practices for lifting patients and heavy equipment, and use of protective gear while handling potentially hazardous substances, patient samples, and equipment.

- **Ensure compliance of staff members to hospital policies**

The hospital managers need to create a system for ensuring compliance of the staff to hospital rules and regulations regarding workplace safety. Regular audits need to be carried out to check if the policies of the hospital are being strictly adhered to by the hospital employees. Timely interventions need to be promoted that enhance the provision of workplace safety assurance such as updating policies at regular intervals, and introducing new gear and equipment for the safety of the hospital workers.

- **Create a reporting system for use by the hospital staff**

An adequate reporting system needs to be created where hospital workers can report any potentially dangerous substances, equipment, or activity to the concerned authorities. Hospital staff needs to be trained in the usage of the reporting system and identification of any

substance or activity that can cause harm to either the employees themselves or to the patients.

Conclusion

Based on the available guidelines for promoting workplace health and safety by government as well as private healthcare organizations, an extensive workplace safety risk assessment was carried out for a public hospital in Australia. The key issues that were identified included lack of adequate training, lack of a proper reporting system, increased risk of injuries due to heavy lifting activities, and lack of compliance with use of protective clothing while handling hazardous substances. Several recommendations were made to overcome these issues such as providing training programs and training manuals, creating an efficient reporting system, and ensuring compliance with hospital policies. It is hoped that following these recommendations and staying updated with the most recent trends in occupational health and safety methods will promote a better work environment for the hospital staff eventually leading to higher productivity and better quality healthcare services provided to patients.

References

Australian Medical Association. (2015, December 10). Safe work environments – 2015.

Retrieved from <https://ama.com.au/position-statement/safe-work-environments>.

Ball, A. (2010, April 7). Australia: Hospital Operators Occupational Health & Safety - Duty of

Care Requirements. Retrieved from <http://www.mondaq.com/australia/x/97660/Health>

Safety/Hospital Operators Occupational Health Safety Duty of Care Requirements.

Tziaferi, S. G., Sourtzi, P., Kalokairinou, A., Sgourou, E., Koumoulas, E., & Velonakis, E. (2011).

Risk Assessment of Physical Hazards in Greek Hospitals Combining Staff's Perception,

Experts' Evaluation and Objective Measurements. *Safety and Health at Work*, 2(3), 260–

272. doi: 10.5491/shaw.2011.2.3.260