

Young Workers

In my home province of British Columbia (BC), the Workers' Compensation Board (WCB) reports that the accident and death rate of young workers on the job aged 15-24, is the highest risk category of any working group in the province. B.C. has more than a quarter of a million young workers and protecting them is everyone's responsibility, including their own.

While reading about Dick Martin, and the tremendous respect that he had with community and organized parties, I couldn't help but focus on one quality in particular. Dick was quoted as saying that "We must work towards a better legacy for our children and grandchildren. We must remain active and demand change. We owe it to ourselves and future generations."

Start Early

Our society, not just Canada but world wide, needs leaders that are not afraid to demand change from employers and politicians alike. During Dick's 30+ years in the labour movement, he was known to put workers first. Who better to target than the youth of today? Young workers need to be educated about their safety rights and responsibilities in the workplace.

Young workers need:

- To receive education and training about safe work procedures and how to recognize hazards on the job
- To receive proper supervision to make sure they work without undue risk
- To have the equipment and safety gear required to do their job safely.

Too often young workers are taken for granted. Most are simply trying to raise funds for tuition or sustain a reasonable level of life, while striving to decide what it is they want to do in life. It takes leaders like Dick Martin who was willing to go "out of his way to help one worker, if he thought the worker could benefit from his efforts."

Tragic Beginning

My safety career started early on in life. In the summer of 1986, my family suffered the loss of my younger brother, due to a home accident that could have been prevented. It was a tragic event that seems only too real for young workers uneducated about the hazards of taking shortcuts to achieve an end result. My brother walked into our family garage and tried to gain access to a large sheet of glass that was hidden behind an old refrigerator. He was wearing a light shirt and shorts. For some unknown reason, the glass broke in half and came down like a guillotine.

My brother was not able to react, and was lacerated to the right of his naval. The six inch laceration was deep enough to severe his aorta lengthwise. My parents and I were home at the time, and rushed outside to find him lying on our back lawn. While my parents called for assistance, I tried to stop the bleeding. He rolled his eyes and said, "I'm going to pass out." Those were the last words he ever spoke. I tried to keep him alive by performing mouth to mouth. He vomited strawberry ice cream into my mouth. I ignored it and carried on with what I had to do. My brother lost half of his body's blood before he was rushed to hospital. His brain was without oxygen for one hour. Had he survived, he would not have regained consciousness. His injuries were too extreme, and he succumbed twelve hours later.

I vowed from that day on never to be in the situation of not knowing what to do again. I enrolled in an Industrial First Aid course, and have held my ticket for 15 years. Before losing my job at a paper mill in 2001, I was employed as the senior First Aid Attendant. Parts of my duties were to orient new workers about the hazards of their jobs, and why they needed to take the time to ask how to perform them safely. I was amazed at how young workers were ignorant of the fact that they had rights and safe job performance was one of them.

Educate The Young

In my twelve years at the mill, safeguarding issues were perhaps the biggest safety concern. The concept of engineering out hazards by providing safeguards is fundamental to every occupational safety and health program. These young workers didn't realize that many written regulations concern the identification of mechanical hazards and positive activity to protect them from the hazards. Short cuts were taken, and these young workers suffered the consequences.

One of the first questions that I would ask young workers to my company was "Do you know what WHMIS stands for?" While the answers were varied, the bottom line was "No." I was amazed to learn that Dick Martin was an instrumental contributor to the accomplishment of getting federal and provincial governments along with labour and management to agree to this legislation. The Workplace Hazardous Material Information System (WHMIS) is a nationwide system providing information on hazardous materials used in the workplace. WHMIS recognizes the interests of workers, employers, suppliers, and regulators-balancing the worker's right to know about hazards with industry's right to protect confidential business information.

Often, young workers carelessly reach for the nearest cleaning agent, not realizing that inhalation or absorption of these chemicals can lead to a reaction where atoms or molecules interact to form or break chemical bonds. The results can be devastating. Education can prevent the tragic loss of our youth from Controlled substances.

Ask Questions

Young workers are often too intimidated by employers to ask questions about safety in the workplace. As a young worker:

- Don't assume you can do something you've never done before. Ask your supervisor to show you how to do it safely before you begin work.
- Ask your employer for job safety training if none is provided.
- Use all safety gear and protective clothing when and where required.
- Always follow safe work procedures and encourage your co-workers to do the same.
- Immediately correct unsafe conditions or report them right away to your supervisor.
- Know how to handle any hazardous materials or chemicals you use on the job.
- Talk to your supervisor if you have any doubts about your safety.
- Make suggestions to improve health and safety at your workplace.

I believe that young workers should be taught during every job orientation what their peers have had to endure, in order to have changes made in the workplace. There has to be a system in place where our youth can rely on senior employees to teach them why we have events like our National Day of Mourning. It wasn't in the limelight until someone like Dick Martin helped pioneer recognition for workers who had died or were injured on the job. Perhaps losing the attitude that young workers have to learn the ropes before they do things safely will go a long way to prevent future suffering.

Resources Available

Young workers should not rely on education from their peers alone. Several resources are available to young workers to further their knowledge on subjects like:

- Industrial hygiene
- Occupational dermatitis
- Industrial noise
- Ergonomics and
- Personal protective equipment.

One of the best resources available to our youth is the information that is distributed by the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS). The professionals in this organization can help our youth identify hazards, take action to prevent injuries, or to control conditions that may affect the health of themselves and other workers. Not only are personal questions answered by a CCOHS professional, resources are available for any company that wishes to educate young workers about the hazards they face coming into the workforce.

Youth Zone, on the CCOHS website, provides a means for practical information to be relayed to young workers. Efforts like this were formed to convey the word about youth health and safety with the target goal of preventing work injuries in the highest worker risk group - our young workers. According to The Young Workers Zone, recently, almost 111,000 young people were seriously injured on the job over a one-year period. This statistic represents one in every four injured workers in Canada...and that's **too** high.

The Future

Dick Martin spent countless hours increasing the awareness level of Occupational Hazards for workers of all ages. Being a family man myself, I can appreciate the time out he took from his job duties to spend time with his three children. Unless you've had the unfortunate experience of losing one of your children to a home or work accident, one cannot know how devastating the loss of a child can be on a parent.

For seventeen years, my father has ended his conversations with me by saying "Be Careful." I think that plays in the back of my mind every time I see my children playing. It must be tiring for my children to keep hearing their father constantly reminding them to play safe and be careful. Perhaps I'm preparing them for the day they enter the workforce.

May 31st, 2004, I will graduate from a program I know is the next step up from working as an Industrial First Aid attendant. Instead of treating the horrors related to the hazards our youth face today, I will be trying to prevent them. I will try to instill the concept preached by Dick Martin that a little at a time achieves a lot in the big picture. Am I making a difference in the world today? No. Will I have achieved a difference in ten years? Absolutely!

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