

A Bridge Between Workers, Management, and Regulators

Undoubtedly one of the main driving forces for Dick Martin's passion for worker health and safety was his experience in the nickel mines of Manitoba. First-hand experience in dangerous work environments instills an appreciation for the importance of health and safety that no classroom education could ever provide. Martin was unique in his ability to garner widespread respect from his worker peers while maintaining an effective dialogue with management and government regulators. His success in establishing the groundbreaking Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System (WHMIS) program and National Day of Mourning are clear examples of his ability to bridge the gap between workers, management, and the government. I hope one day I can perform a similar role and foster practical, effective, health and safety partnerships between workers, regulators, and management. I think this is best achieved by education and communication between the stakeholders in a workplace, rather than by mandates, fines, and increasing layers of regulation.

Like Martin, I come from a working background – I'm a tradesperson, having worked as a plastics fabricator, woodworker, shipwright, fire-extinguisher technician, and most recently as an outboard engine mechanic. I have never worked in a unionized environment, and only in small shops, but I've been a vocal health and safety advocate since I entered the workforce. I'm now a student in an industrial hygiene graduate program, and I hope that my first-hand experience as a worker in hazardous occupations will help me be a more passionate, practical, and effective hygienist, and allow me to spawn a better appreciation for the importance of health and safety amongst my management colleagues. Martin's legacy demonstrates that this goal is certainly achievable, but it requires a huge amount of drive and commitment.

Dick Martin's successes in achieving change for workers unfortunately required "labour unrest" to garner attention from management. My goal is to better educate designers and management to the importance and value of occupational health and safety (OH&S), so that rather than being viewed as an expense to be minimized, OH&S becomes an integral part of the work process and its evolution. For example, when faced with a chemical exposure that needs to be controlled, a frequent solution is substitution of a less hazardous product, perhaps a modern water-based product rather than a solvent-based product. Many managers and engineers believe that since this new material is "non-toxic" according to its manufacturer, their OH&S burden is over and the problem is solved. On the contrary, however, a whole new industrial hygiene task has just begun. The ongoing introduction of "less-hazardous" materials and processes carries with it a responsibility to properly research the health effects of these new exposures, thus the basic building blocks of hygiene, such as industrial toxicology, occupational epidemiology, exposure monitoring, and innovation in exposure controls will never cease. Even workers in supposedly "minimal-hazard" occupations, such as office staff, are recognized to suffer from musculo-skeletal injuries and disease related to indoor air quality. Thus the occupational hygienist's mandate to recognize, evaluate, and control physical, chemical, and biological hazards will never disappear; the hazards will change but the need is ever-present. I think an effective hygienist can take Martin's

values to heart, and be a vocal OH&S representative for workers, by convincing management that a real commitment to OH&S is “good business”.

Workers, too, can benefit from a better understanding of their role in *their own* safety. In my experience, many workers in small businesses, especially young workers and recent immigrants to Canada, have no knowledge of their rights as far as health and safety. The right to refuse unsafe work, right-to-know regulations, and the right to be trained effectively all need better communication. Likewise, the responsibility of workers to work safely also needs to be stressed. I think an OH&S advocate who has actually “been in the shoes of the worker” can be a more effective communicator, both as an educator and as a listener. Dick Martin’s ability in this regard developed into a life-long passion; his dedication to the WHMIS program in particular shows he was keenly aware of workers basic concerns about the chemicals they used everyday. In the more specialized field of industrial hygiene, workers themselves are often the best source of information regarding high exposure events, causes of accidents, and best design of exposure controls. Listening closely to workers’ concerns can also be beneficial when establishing priorities for exposure controls, and undoubtedly will lead to improved labour relations.

In many ways, the Canadian Center for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS) operates under the same values Martin did. Rather than being simply a resource for upper-level safety professionals and hygienists, the CCOHS is specifically tasked to provide occupational health and safety data, free of charge, to *anybody* who requests it. Martin’s drive to protect workers and give them the voice to express their safety concerns is made possible by the information the CCOHS provides. By giving workers the information to recognize hazards in their own workplace, a culture of safety awareness is instilled throughout a company, from the bottom up. Even though it is based in Canada, the CCOHS synthesizes data from around the world, allowing recognition and control of hazards before they injure workers, even if those hazards have not yet been uncovered here.

As Dick Martin progressed in his career, he began to be more vocal in his concerns about the damage some industries cause to the environment. Again, Martin showed his ability to lead and find common ground, uniting environmentalists and labour activists, who traditionally have not always seen eye-to-eye in Canada’s resource economy. I believe the integration of occupational health and safety and environmental protection is a natural progression, since it follows that if our work practices are harming workers, we are likely also harming surrounding residents and other living things as well. Unfortunately, this idea is somewhat new to OH&S staff, especially in the hygiene field I am pursuing. For example, hygienists often advocate local exhaust ventilation as an exposure control, which is very effective. However, without the proper scrubbing, filtration, and disposal of this waste stream, one simply creates an environmental health problem from an occupational problem. My undergraduate degree is in environmental biology, so hopefully I could again act as an educator, this time to my colleagues in hygiene, to show the value inherent in a less narrow view of exposure control.

When one considers the pioneers of occupational health and safety in North America, often the medical professionals such as Alice Hamilton and Frank Patty are the only activists that are mentioned in the history sections of students’ textbooks. Behind those

researchers, however, are the health and safety advocates amongst the workers themselves that provided the “push” to enact safety regulations once the medical facts were established. Dick Martin was one of these people, and deserves such recognition. He was so effective as a workers’ advocate because of his communication skills and willingness to fight for the proper solution to a problem, even if it was unpopular. I hope to use Martin’s enthusiasm and successes as inspiration to better educate workers, management, and regulators about their roles in occupational health and safety. Hopefully a better understanding of the role of OH&S amongst the stakeholders in a workplace can more effectively protect workers, by fostering a proactive, rather than reactive, approach to worker health.

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