POSITION STATEMENT

Occupational Health Surveillance

INTRODUCTION

Occupational health surveillance is ongoing systematic collection, analysis and interpretation of health data for purposes of improving health and safety (NIOSH). The Occupational Safety and Health Administration mandates occupational health surveillance in specific standards for general industry (OSHA, OSH Act 1970); other agencies, such as the United States Department of Transportation, provide guidance on specific worker health surveillance programs.

Occupational health surveillance occurs for the purposes of:

- determining the effects of workplace exposures by identifying linkages between workplace exposures and adverse health outcomes
- detection of early disease in individuals followed by interventions to prevent further exacerbation (NIOSH)
- assuring a certain degree of health and/or fitness of workers who perform specific work tasks such as driving/flying commercial vehicles or tasks that require protection such as respirators
- facilitating worker and public health and safety by designing control measures to prevent illness and injury
- providing a basis for establishing engineering and administrative controls of workplace hazards
- tracking and monitoring metrics to guide health and safety efforts.

Key to the success of an occupational surveillance program is the dissemination and use of the data to improve health (NIOSH). The data collected in occupational surveillance programs can yield valuable information for the:

- measurement of the burden of an injury, disease, health-related event or exposure
- identification of populations at highest risk
- identification of new or emerging health concerns (NIOSH)
- guidance about planning, implementing, and evaluating programs to prevent or control injuries, diseases or adverse exposures (NIOSH, OSHA)
- prioritization of health resource allocation. (NIOSH).

RATIONALE

Occupational and environmental health nurses (OHNs) are vital to quality, cost-effective occupational and environmental health programs. A strong health surveillance program, implemented by the OHN or nurse manager, is an essential component of an employer's effort to promote workers' optimal health and safety, thus preserving the company's valuable human and financial resources.

Certified occupational and environmental health nurses are knowledgeable in the occupational, biological, and public health sciences, including research methods, epidemiology, environmental health, biostatistics, toxicology, safety, industrial hygiene, and ergonomics. Within the scope of their state licensure, OHNs:

- develop protocols, plan, conduct, supervise, and evaluate the occupational health surveillance program
- participate in company-wide strategic planning
- coordinate responsibilities with other occupational and environmental health professionals as well as workers, management, engineers, and other professionals as appropriate
- conduct screenings and interpret results of the tests required for occupational health surveillance, referring employees for additional tests as necessary
- recommend action based on results of the tests, (e.g. monitoring of work areas, elimination of hazards, removal of workers from hazardous situations, or mandatory use of personal protective equipment)
- establish and maintain a system of recordkeeping, both individual worker records and data in aggregate for trend analysis
- evaluate the program's effectiveness and take corrective action as necessary
- ensure compliance with OSHA and other agency standards
- select, manage, and evaluate vendor-provided services.

Registered nurses and nurse practitioners can be certified in the specialty practice of occupational and environmental health nursing through a combination of experience and additional education, in addition to education required for licensure. Additional education typically includes epidemiology, toxicology, industrial hygiene, recognition and management of occupational illnesses and injuries, research and general management of comprehensive occupational and environmental health programs. Occupational and environmental health nurses are qualified to design, manage, and supervise the delivery of health care in the occupational setting. They can provide screenings and surveillance including:

- pre-placement/post-offer physical examinations
- job placement assessments
- periodic examinations
- maintenance of confidential health records. (OSHA)

Occupational and environmental health care professionals, like the certified OHN, are also qualified to assist the employer in achieving a safe and healthful work environment. They work collaboratively with workers and management to:

- identify potential hazards and choose interventions to prevent, eliminate, minimize, or reduce hazards
- develop and manage training programs to promote health and safety
- enhance the accuracy of recordkeeping. (OSHA).

CONCLUSION

The American Association of Occupational Health Nurses (AAOHN) believes that whether working in a single nurse unit, as a member of a multi-disciplinary occupational and environmental health team, or as a private consultant, the OHN is the key to providing a quality health surveillance program. As an occupational and environmental health and safety professional empowered with authority, expertise, and resources to implement and manage occupational and environmental health surveillance as part of a comprehensive health and safety program, the OHN is a major facilitator in providing a safe and healthy workplace which positively impacts workers' productivity and product quality while maintaining cost-effectiveness.

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