

# Workplace Health Bulletin

No. 12, April 2001

## Audit of Funeral Homes Against Industry Code of Practice

### Introduction

In 1998 OSH carried out a nationwide audit of mortuaries and found the majority did not meet basic health and safety standards for staff. During these visits, OSH staff were frequently told that the nation's funeral homes preparing bodies for internment or cremation created greater risks to their staff than the hospital-operated mortuaries.

Coincidentally, in 1997 the Funeral Directors' Association of New Zealand issued an industry code of practice under the Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992 (HSE Act) in keeping with the Government policy of industry ownership and self-regulation. The aim of this code was to provide for the safety, health and protection of all personnel involved in the New Zealand funeral industry. As a result of these two events, the OSH health services staff elected to audit compliance with this code as a special project in 1999.

Working in the funeral industry involves a number of risks. These include: harm arising from poor manual handling techniques; poor infection control; and exposure to chemicals.

Funeral homes were randomly selected for audit by the 18 OSH branches. An audit tool was developed and applied to each home. The audit examined the systems for hazard identification and risk assessment. The hazard management methods employed were also audited, e.g.

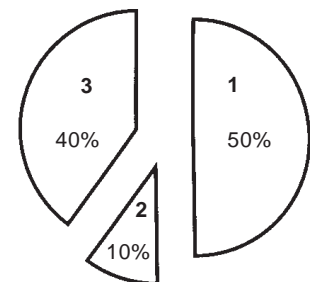
engineering controls, personal protective equipment, monitoring and immunisation, and training and information.

### Results

A total of 49 funeral homes were audited from among an estimated 162 in New Zealand. Half of this sample had a comprehensive hazard identification system while 10% had not complied with this most basic requirement of the HSE Act. Risk assessments were carried out by 35 of the 49 funeral homes and 25 (50%) of the homes had an appropriately prepared "high risk" area. However, a further four homes (making a total of 59% of the sample) adequately minimised the risk through other mechanisms.

#### Presence of Hazard ID

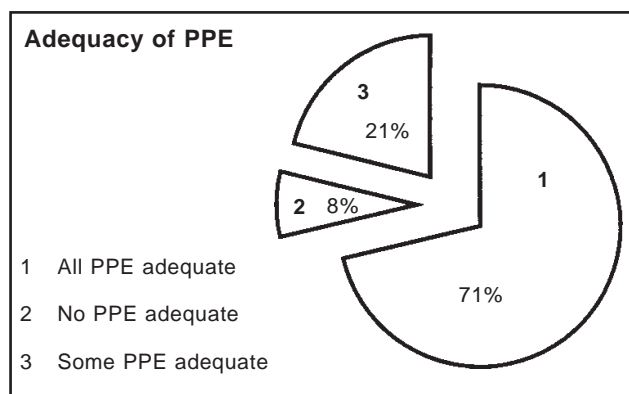
- 1 Hazard id present in all areas
- 2 Hazard id absent in all areas
- 3 Hazard id present in some areas



Sixty one percent (61%) of the homes had a negative air pressure in the embalming area and all but one of these had air changes of six or greater in this area. Only 17 (35%) of the homes,

however, met all the suggested ventilation requirements (negative pressure + air changes + direct exterior exhaust + regular maintenance). Mechanical ventilation of any nature was not used in 11 (23%) homes, but four (36% of those without any assisted ventilation) risk-assessed their cases.

The majority of homes (71%) provided the recommended range of personal protective equipment (PPE) but 8% of the homes were inadequate in this respect.



Although 36 (74%) ensured staff were appropriately immunised, only 26 (53%) provided comprehensive personal care (immunisations + adequate contact-tracing procedures + blood or body fluid exposure first aid).

## Discussion

The HSE Act was introduced in 1993 and ushered in an era of self-regulation by industry. As part of this self-regulation industry groups would write codes of practice in a co-operative manner with Government agencies ensuring “best practice” documents that reflected proven “practical steps” to control risks in the workplace.

In 1997 the Funeral Directors’ Association developed an industry code of practice for health and safety. However, the association is a voluntary one, and, consequently, not all funeral homes belong.

It was clear from the audit that approximately 50% of the funeral homes had adopted the health

and safety principles contained in the code and had studiously implemented its recommendations, including designing for safety, training staff and ensuring procedures were in place in the event of hazardous exposures. The provision of personal protective equipment (PPE) in over 70% of the homes was also encouraging.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, four funeral homes required the imposition of immediate improvement notices. As many as 10% had not carried out a risk assessment, the most basic principle of the HSE Act.

The remaining 22 (45%) of funeral homes had some defects in their health and safety management systems and did not meet the standards established by their own colleagues. For example, only 17 homes met the suggested ventilation requirement.

It was concluded by OSH that only 23 funeral homes (47%) meet the standards established by the industry-developed code of practice. This code establishes minimum performance standards to enable all members of the industry to meet their health and safety requirements, and should act as a baseline for accepted practice in this industry.

It is recommended that this industry continue to review and subsequently improve compliance with the Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992. The Funeral Directors’ Association is able to assist their members to achieve this. OSH will continue to periodically monitor the industry to ensure compliance with the legislation.

If you require any more information about the information in this bulletin or the legislation, please contact your local OSH service centre (the address is in the blue pages of your telephone book), or visit our website at:

[www.osh.dol.govt.nz](http://www.osh.dol.govt.nz)

Alternatively, you may wish to contact the Funeral Directors’ Association of New Zealand, PO Box 10-888, Wellington.