

working in this workplace,” notes the latest decision from August 19. “The anecdotal evidence supplied by the worker of people reacting to the smell of paint in the office... would tend to confirm there is, in fact, exposure to paint fumes.”

On December 17, 2009, the 43-year-old estimator went to hospital with shortness of breath after experiencing a serious asthma attack and was also diagnosed with pneumonia. Two days later, he returned to hospital with worsening shortness of breath.

By February, the worker visited a respirologist, who reported the workplace had very little, if any, ventilation and that the worker had “a very significant exposure to auto spray paint (toluene diisocyanate),” the decision states.

An occupational hygiene officer with WorkSafeBC went to the workplace that March and noted paints containing isocyanates were being sprayed in a paint booth adjacent to the worker’s office. As well, contaminated air was being exhausted by a fan at the rear of the booth.

The next month, the officer returned to check the air flow rate. Elliot notes “the officer stated the paint booth had some typical deficiencies, and would not be considered best practice, but was not in violation of the health and safety regulations.”

A WorkSafeBC review officer acknowledged the worker may have been exposed to isocyanates when he walked into the paint booth, but concluded his worsening asthma was the result of non-work factors, including sleep apnea, gastroesophageal reflux disorder and smoking.

The worker argued the hygiene officer had not taken air quality measurements, Elliot notes in his ruling, adding the WorkSafeBC file does not contain the officer’s original report. With only the case manager’s account of what the officer reported, “it is impossible to tell how much detail was lost,” and if the investigation was “full and complete.”

Elliot notes that positive pressure in the paint room compared with that in the office created “a mechanism for leakage of fumes into the office through cracks in the wall and through the large filtered opening over the doorway.”

Jason Contant is editor of CANADIAN OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH & SAFETY NEWS.

## Are tattoos still taboo in the workplace?

By Samuel Dunsiger

The adage, “Do not judge a book by its cover,” offers the wisdom of not equating surface and inner qualities. Throw body art into the equation, though, and regard for that caution seems lessened, especially in work settings where employees are in the public eye.

Cayla Martin, a graduate student in the University of Calgary’s Faculty of Education, is conducting a study to find out

if tattoos are still taboo on the job. The research, which is ongoing, focuses on responses from women at the university who have tattoos or body piercings.

A 2010 study released by the Toronto-based Canadian Liver Foundation shows that 20 per cent of baby boomers aged 40 or older had a tattoo or had considered getting one, and eight per cent have a piercing. “Despite the fact that body art has become more mainstream in recent years, there still seems to be a stigma attached to the choice of personal appearance when it comes to finding a place in the working world,” notes a statement from the University of Calgary.

Martin says that she was drawn to the research because it hits close to home. “As a female university student with piercings and tattoos, I’ve definitely felt some stigma because of these forms of expression,” she adds.

Shelley Mathieson, owner of Sink or Swim Tattoo Studio in Aurora, Ontario, says many of her clients work in “traditional job settings,” such as retail, real estate and finance. “Even though there may still be a [negative] perception about tattoos and the people who have them, the trend towards acceptance is improving,” Mathieson suggests.

However, the potential for a cool reception from employers and co-workers remains, says Antoinette Blunt, president of Ironside Consulting Services, a human resources consulting company in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario.

Traditional tattoo locations — say a flower on a woman’s shoulder — seem not to cause much of a stir. But workers who are all-in, covering their arms or chest, can be viewed as “extreme and distracting at the workplace,” Blunt suggests.

This may prove more of an issue for workers who interact with customers. “If I’m running a business, I have to think about customers and what would be seen as appropriate.”

For certain sectors, the objection to piercings is grounded in a proven concern: jewellery can potentially expose a worker to the hazard of getting caught in machinery.

Manufacturing workers are just one example, says Ian Howcroft, vice-president of the Ontario division of Canadian Manufacturers & Exporters (CME) in Mississauga, Ontario. Howcroft says he remembers a recent call from a CME Ontario member about “someone whose bracelet got caught in a conveyor belt.”

Injury risk is present any time that a worker wears something which can get entangled: loose clothing, bandanas or key chains, notes Dhananjai Borwankar, a technical specialist at the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety in Hamilton, Ontario. The risk of piercing-related injuries is greater when working around rotating equipment, like in the aforementioned manufacturing sector, but also in carpentry, mining and welding, Borwankar says.

Blunt points out that the key to mitigating related hazards is to temporarily remove piercings. However, she cautions against a full ban on displaying body art.

“There needs to be a balance between thinking about safety and respecting the needs and freedoms of employees.”

Samuel Dunsiger is a writer in Toronto.

