Question:

"Is workplace stress an issue in your workplace? Do you experience issues such as excessive workload, chronic understaffing, lack of recognition, lack of support, lack of rewards, and little control over your work? Are workplace bullying, violence, and harassment part of your environment?" If you said yes, read on...

Answer:

Taking action on workplace stress

Terri Aversa, OPSEU Health and Safety Officer

Is workplace stress an issue in your workplace? Do you experience issues such as excessive workload, chronic understaffing, lack of recognition, lack of support, lack of rewards, and little control over your work? Are workplace bullying, violence, and harassment part of your environment? If you said yes, you are like millions of other workers in Canada who suffer huge health burdens from these not-so-obvious or recognized workplace factors, termed "psychosocial hazards."

OPSEU is one of at least ten unions, together with Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers, that participate on a committee that is developing an online resource kit and tools for workers to take action on workplace stress. The committee, called the "Mental Injury Tool Group (MIT)," believes hazards at work that cause or contribute to mental distress for workers need to be identified and addressed just like other health and safety hazards. MIT also criticizes the current main approach that focuses on accommodating individuals and improving workers' coping abilities through wellness initiatives and Employee Assistance Programs. While these are absolutely important activities (and need to occur), the prevention of workplace factors that cause or contribute to the conditions is not being recognized or addressed. Employers need to understand that organizational factors may play a role in affecting a worker's mental state. Work can cause or contribute to workers' stress and, as such, employers can and should take steps to remove or minimize the factors at work causing the harm.

The implications of workplace stress are wide-ranging. There are economic, moral, and legal reasons to intervene and deal with these workplace factors. Not only are the lost-time costs and other costs to the system detrimental, but the adverse health effects can range from undiagnosed to diagnosed mental health conditions that affect workers' health and the quality of their lives. It can also cause a wide range of stress-induced or aggravated physical health disease such as musculoskeletal disorders and cardiovascular diseases. Emerging decisions in seven types of law (labour relations, occupational health and safety, compensation, human rights, employment standards, employment contract, and tort) all increasingly point to employers being obligated to provide psychologically safe workplaces for employees. This emerging trend in law coincides with the development of a Canadian standard, "Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace" to be released in the fall 2012. The standard was created through a consultation process led by the Canadian Standards Association. It will be a voluntary standard that gives employers a systems approach to provide psychologically safe workplaces. The standard represents a rising awareness in Canada that mental well-being is just as important to a safe and healthy workplace as physical well-being.

Canada is steps behind Europe on this issue. The idea that mental health and safety is important is NOT new to Europe. In Europe, government authorities actively recognize and legally require the prevention of psychosocial hazards. Inspectors are trained to identify and write orders regarding psychosocial hazards and the topic is part of regular enforcement strategies in health and safety inspection. Although this awareness has not yet overtaken Canadian jurisdictions, the recent developments are a help. Raising awareness of these hazards in the health and safety and compensation systems, and in society as a whole, is also part of MIT's goals. The resource kit (to be released in October 2012) is an effort to arm workers with information on how to take action, raise system awareness of these hazards, emphasizing the importance of preventing the hazards and compensating the resulting negative health outcomes.

Now is the time for workplace health and safety committees and representatives to take action. With the release of "Psychological Health and Safety in the Workplace" and the increasing focus on the issue of psychosocial hazards, workers need to be vocal and act in the workplace to prevent psychosocial hazards. Workers and unions need to be loud in convincing employers that preventing these hazards is part of their existing health and safety responsibilities. Finally, workers and unions need to ensure that Ontario's Ministry of Labour, Workplace Safety and Insurance Board, and other system stakeholders take these hazards seriously and treat them the same as any other health and safety hazard—in enforcement, in compensation, and in prevention strategy.