

Infection control and workplace safety: Knowledge and practices in the Bloemfontein Central Laundry

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Background and Objectives:

Laundry workers (LWs) are at risk for occupational hazards, including infectious diseases, chemical exposures, and musculo-skeletal problems. The Occupational Health and Safety Act (1993) requires that employers provide vaccination against hepatitis B, suitable personal protective equipment, and ensure safety for workers using machinery. Observation revealed concerns that laundry workers were not adhering to infection control and safety practices (ICSP). This study was done to assess the knowledge and ICSP of LWs.

Methods:

The literature and relevant guidelines and regulations were reviewed to determine best ICSP for LWs. A questionnaire was developed, piloted and adapted. The questions collected information on demographics, knowledge and reporting practices on work place hazards, and knowledge about ICSP. Participation was voluntary. The questionnaire was self-administered or by interview. Data was analysed using univariate analysis. Authorisation was obtained from Head, Laundry Services, laundry management, and information sessions were held for all including employees and unions.

Results and Discussion:

Questionnaires were completed by 68/128 (53%) of the LWs, but not all respondents completed all questions. Production workers represented the largest participant group (71 %). The median age group was 30-39 years old, and 56% had less than 5 years experience. The male: female ratio was 60:40 and 78% were black. Vaccination against hepatitis B was reported by 85%. Injuries at work were due to needle-sticks (12%) and other (21%). The majority (82%) knew how to contact the Health and Safety (H&S) representative, but only 56% report regularly doing so. A high percentage of respondents reported that no training was received on needle-stick injury prevention (90%), machine hazards (69%), use of protective equipment (57%), safe lifting of linen bags (46%), HIV/AIDS prevention (37%), and hand hygiene (30%). Reported failure to follow safe practices included: never using eye protection (72%), not using guards on machinery (47%), not changing procedures with infected linens (37%) and not getting supervision on safe working practices (31%). Study limitations include bias due to self-reporting, volunteer participation, unequal risk across all sections of the laundry, and insufficient responses to allow bivariate analysis.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

ICSP important to protect LWs were determined. Discrepancies between reported knowledge and practices were identified. A review of training programs for LWs on ICSP is needed and additional training is required. Policy and guidelines for ICSP for LWs should be developed.