

# OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY What can it teach us?

Occupational Health and Safety Legislation in all Australian States and Territories has been developed to ensure a safe working environment for employees, regardless of the place or form of employment. Not surprisingly most employment involves vision. Thus the assessment of vision is an integral skill to be tested for every work environment.

The assessment of vision can reveal if an employee meets a generally accepted normal standard such as an acuity level of 6/6 or detect the existence of an abnormality. Vision tests can extend into the assessment of the vision skills necessary for the employment task as identified by a laid down standard or in special cases through an on site visit. The tests can also provide a rich source for the collection of normal responses within an adult population.

Vision tests to determine the presence of normal function can be as simple as a test for acuity. Even in this simple form the tests can provide a base line of information so that change in standard can be detected at a later time. Some changes have been argued to be due to poor work place environments and have led to the generation of assessment strategies such as the Hazpak<sup>1</sup> which is one method that determines the risk associated with employment tasks and ensure strategies are set into place to avoid damage.

Alternatively, vision tests can extend to determine if an individual meets an occupational standard. The tests include colour vision, detection and measurement of ocular deviations for the armed forces<sup>2</sup> or commercial drivers licensing standards<sup>3</sup>. Such standards are sometimes challenged through OHS testing procedures and revoked by individual appeal based on the Anti Discrimination Act (1977) NSW. The Commonwealth also has the "Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission to which complaints may also be made, pertaining to various bases of discrimination such as race, sex and physical disability" P. Staunton (2003)<sup>4</sup>. At times Occupational Health and safety reports can cumulatively change existing policy as has been seen in the most recent medical standards for licensing<sup>3</sup> where colour vision was removed as a required standard for commercial drivers. The change was based on reports of no accidents in colour defective drivers.

The assessment of vision in a general format such as an acuity test alone, does not provide an adequate guide about the ability of an employee to undertake a task. If for instance an employee has as a major role working at night, or in a situation where light levels are decreased, then tests to determine the ability to cope in low light levels should be performed along with the general tests. The increased incidence of accidents in a work environment signals environmental problems and the need for specialised testing techniques. These may be best performed by observing the employee in the work environment and making recommendations to enhance performance and safety.

These on site visits can then lead to a vision standard being established for future employees. During clinical consultations orthoptists are often in the situation where simple common sense recommendations can be made, for instance the value of regular short breaks from computer use and increasing blink rate during working hours, can be emphasised with a patient experiencing dry eyes.

Personal experience has shown that assessment of the vision of employees yields many people with a very high standard of vision. Data from these tests has provided valuable information about the "normal" response in an adult population. This has two outcomes. The first is it increases our knowledge of normal standards which may be at a higher level than previously thought. The second is by setting a new normal level the point for the existence of abnormality is reset.

OHS is therefore a rich source of information for the employee, the employer and the practitioner. It can bring change to policy, protect the employee and provide evidence to enhance the knowledge of health professionals.

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## References

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