



Why aren't the numbers moving?

The International Day of Mourning on April 28th honours the memory of workers who have succumbed to workplace accidents or illness. This inaugural column is dedicated to them.

A few years ago I wrote a blues tune called *The Jobsite Prayer*. The chorus goes "oh Lord please, ooooo please, ooooo please, don't let me use my first aid."

We've come along way since the mid-1980s, when a crew chief would hand you a chainsaw and tell you to hop to it, or send you into traffic with a stop sign and a high-vis vest, or into the bush without a first aid kit or a radio.



As a green rodder on a survey crew, I was injured when the contractor used a loader that didn't have working brakes to carry materials up a slope—and then used the bucket as his brake to get back to the bottom. This caused enough vibration to loosen a rock the size of a cantaloupe that fell on my knee. When I filed the report, my boss swore at me and called me an idiot for reporting that the loader had no brakes. It is a truly a wonder when you meet older tradespeople that have never been hurt.

As I started this assignment, a 22-year old lost his life when he was crushed in the cab of his crane on the Canada Line job. A logger was killed later that week. The following week, two more workers were needlessly killed in the lower mainland. Crewmen are still entering excavations too deep to survive if they collapse.

On a short clip on *The National* reporting on jobsite fatalities, I saw a man without a hardhat standing under a log suspended from a crane—and in that same clip, a guy using a chainsaw with his face protection flipped up. Should we really be surprised when they report there are still 30 to 35 fatalities a year in the forest industry alone?

I called WorkSafe BC to get the fatality numbers for 2007 and was told to use 160 because the numbers have been somewhere between 150 and 170 for years.

Why aren't these numbers moving?

Workplace accidents or illnesses that don't end in loss of life are still devastating. Statistics reveal that after six months of disability, most people never return to the work force. In the U.K., suicide rates of the disabled unemployed are 40 times higher than the national rate, and there is no reason to believe it is much different here.

Fortunately some larger employers, including CP Rail, BC Hydro and Weyerhaeuser Co., are developing disability-management (DM) and return-to-work programs that can reduce the number of people who go on long term disability by up to 50 per cent. Programs that ease the transition back to meaningful employment after extended medical leave are life-changing for the individuals involved and can save employers big dollars in lost wages and disability claims.

The University of Northern British Columbia now offers a master's degree in DM, where practitioners with a wide range of backgrounds are trained in economics, health care, social work, human resources, business and occupational therapy. They leave the program well-equipped to work with employers in tailoring plans that get individuals back to work.

On a personal note, I went into a store where I had bought my first and most comfortable pair of ladies-sized work boots. They said they were no longer carrying ladies' work boots. Are they nuts? It is unbelievable that this is happening in 2008, when there are more women on jobsites than ever! I can't buy women's boots off the shelf, headsets in helicopters routinely sit around my jawbone and I wear cadet-sized work gloves when I can find them.

Sure, we've come a long way in terms of safety programs and how we deal with the sick and injured workers that survive, but we have to stay vigilant because the numbers aren't budging. ♦

Tonia Jurbin, P. Eng. is a geotechnical engineer and regular contributor to WCN. She is based in Greater Vancouver. www.toniajurbin.com. Contact editor@on-sitemag.com.

Rate this article

We want your opinion! And let us know what topics you would find useful in upcoming issues. Please visit www.on-sitemag.com and click on FEEDBACK.

