

PLAIN LANGUAGE SUMMARY

The recognition and reporting of occupational disease are important issues in occupational health and safety. Previous studies have indicated that occupational disease is under-recognized and under-reported with the estimates of under-reporting ranging from approximately 40% to 90% depending on the particular disease. There are significant consequences from under-reporting. If occupational disease is not recognized and reported to the WSIB, workers will not receive compensation benefits to which they are entitled, their health care costs will not be borne by the WSIB (and indirectly by employers) but will instead be displaced to the public health insurance system and WSIB statistics will not reflect the true burden of occupational disease so that an important stimulus for prevention efforts will not be identified. In addition to under-recognition and under-reporting of occupational disease, there are some instances in which over-recognition and over-reporting may occur although these appear to be less common. Therefore there is a need to understand the factors that affect recognition and reporting of occupational disease in more detail. This pilot study was carried out to explore the conceptual basis and substantive issues influencing recognition and reporting of occupational disease.

A qualitative study using focus groups selected to represent key stakeholders in occupational health and safety was used to address the objectives of the study. Seven focus groups were selected as follows: WSIB occupational disease team members, WSIB front line operations team members, WSIB directors, health care professionals, union/worker representatives, employers, and ill and/or injured workers. There were 42 participants overall.

The purpose of the focus group discussions were: (1) to clarify the key concepts that underpin research in this area, (2) to identify the units of analysis, including new units of analysis, needed to address this area of research in a comprehensive fashion, (3) to identify the determinants of recognition and reporting, including determinants that have not previously been documented in the literature. As well, because the language used by stakeholders may reflect their underlying assumptions, we described and evaluated some of the most relevant descriptive linguistic terms used by the various stakeholders which captured some of their key underlying beliefs about recognition and reporting of occupational disease.

Each focus group session took approximately two hours. A moderator/facilitator and two research assistants were present. The facilitator used a question guide to ensure that all of the relevant issues had been discussed by each group. The sessions were audio-taped and transcribed and the transcripts were imported into the Atlas Ti (2008) software program to facilitate organization, management and analysis of the qualitative data.

The analysis of the data identified a number of conceptual issues of importance to future research in this area: (1) recognition and reporting should be considered different phenomena whose determinants may differ, (2) disease and injury also need to be considered separately when evaluating under-reporting and under-recognition, and (3) terms such as “under-reporting” and “over-reporting” have different meanings to different stakeholders.