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Most workplace deaths in Oregon aren't violent

By Peter De Luca, administrator of Oregon OSHA

I have an interesting, exciting and challenging position as the Administrator of the Oregon Occupational Safety and Health Division (or Oregon OSHA). There are great days full of progress, but the worst days come when I review each and every report of a workplace death in Oregon. I struggle with descriptions like “Male. Age 40. Delivery driver found slumped over due to heart attack.”

There are all kinds of ways to die while at work - being crushed, falling from a height, being struck by an object, drowning, and electrocution. But the most common form of workplace death we see at Oregon OSHA is a heart attack. We see more heart attacks during a 12-month period than all other causes of death combined. They aren't confined to aging sedentary office workers. Heart attack victims are younger than they used to be.

When a company loses a worker through death, everyone loses. Workers represent an investment of time, training, and emotion. The death of a person we know diminishes us all, regardless of the cause of death. Whether it is a violent death or a quiet heart attack, a big hole is left in his or her workplace family.

Today, heart attacks are more preventable. Diet, exercise, and lifestyle choices either create the conditions for a heart attack or create the conditions for preventing one. Employer-sponsored wellness and exercise programs not only contribute to long life; they also make for more productive and more alert workers. And workers who are alert work more safely in general, and are less likely to be involved in accidents.

Employers can exert significant influence over the lifestyle choices the employee decides to follow. A lunchroom that offers healthy choices instead of junk food may help workers eat better. On-site fitness rooms, flu shots for workers, even an on-site physical therapist that visits a worksite for a few hours every week can help employees return to being free from pain, and ready to focus on work.

Companies across Oregon are experiencing a great return on their investment in the healthy lifestyles of their workers. Consider implementing a wellness or employee health program today, and let's reduce the number of heart attacks occurring at work. Everyone deserves to make it home from work safely everyday.

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