

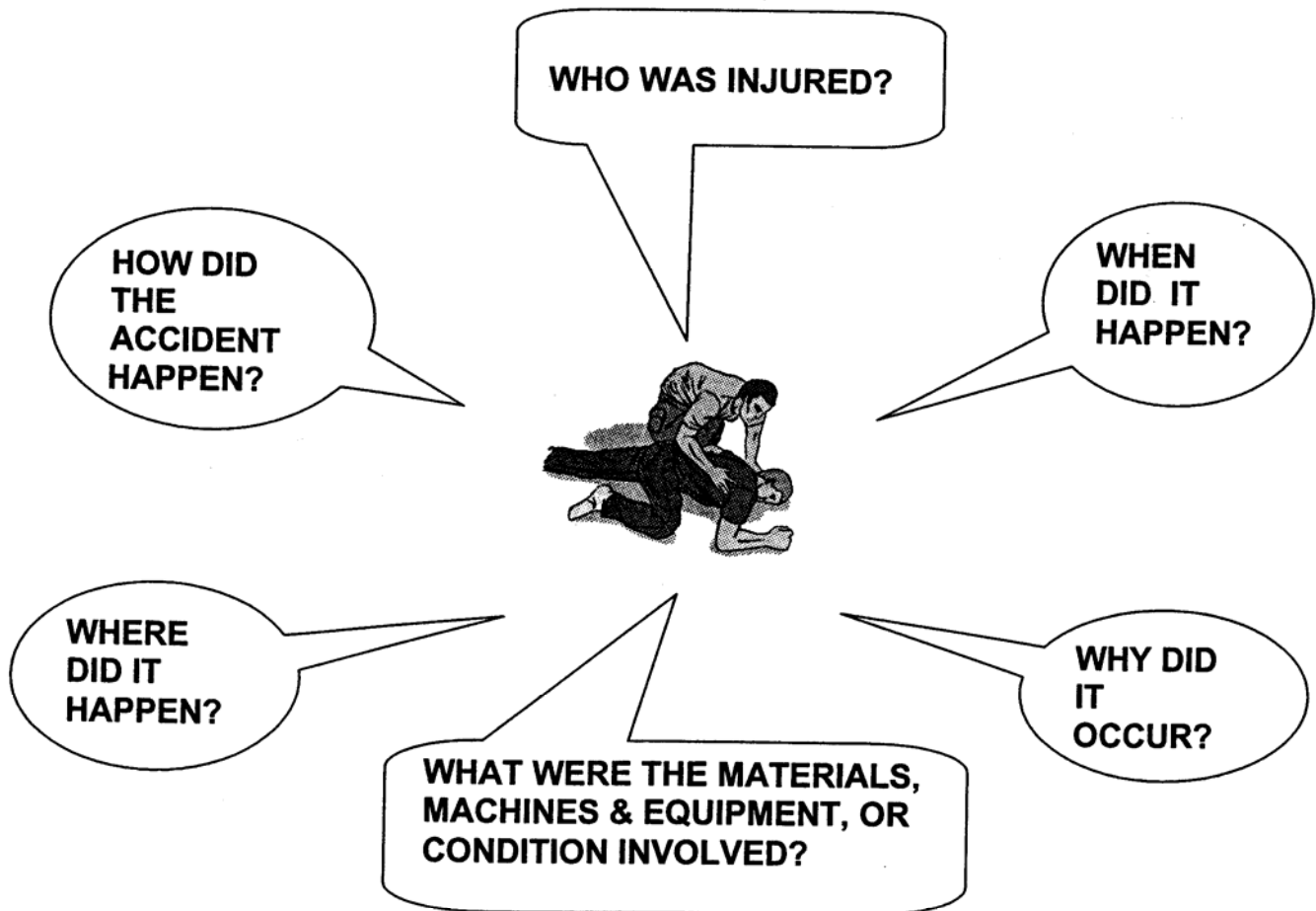


ACCIDENT & DISEASE INVESTIGATION

INVESTIGATE IMMEDIATELY...

DO NOT DELAY

**SIX QUESTIONS TO ANSWER AS THE BASIS OF
ACCIDENT INVESTIGATION**



Accident Investigation

Introduction

Workers must rely upon their co-workers for most of their information about accidents and illnesses in their workplace. It should be kept in mind that the investigation and reporting of accidents and diseases become necessary only after the damage was done. It does nothing to prevent occupational accidents or disease.

Our goal as workers concerned with health and safety, must be to use the information we obtain through our investigation to press for improvements that will prevent further damage to ourselves and other workers.

It is important that the Local Union has the right to thoroughly investigate all on the job accidents. In spite of the dramatic toll of occupational disease, accidents are still responsible for the majority of disabilities and deaths among workers. Most of these accidents are unnecessary and avoidable.

There are a number of ways for Local Unions to participate in accident investigations. The Local should secure access to copies of the employer accident reports.

Local Union Investigation

We need to know the underlying cause of any accident in order to prevent its recurrence. Local Unions have always been involved in accident investigations in an informal way, but it is important that the Safety and Health Representatives be free to investigate accidents formally and thoroughly.

The Local Unions right to investigate should include the following:

1. Immediate notification of all accidents;
2. The right to investigate near misses and other incidents that could jeopardize worker health and safety;
3. The right to participate fully in the investigation including the right to take photographs and measurements; and,
4. The right to interview witnesses, and the right to receive copies of all reports, including that of the company.

The accident investigation allows us to discover its real causes, to suggest corrective measures that will prevent its recurrence, and to re-evaluate the safety program. Keeping these goals in mind makes it easier to know which questions to ask.

Who?

Get the names of everyone involved, witnesses and other workers in the area. Also get the names of the foreman and/or supervisor. Always interview people, who do the same job as the injured worker. This will give you a better understanding of the tasks involved - they will be able to describe the job step-by-step so nothing is over looked.

What?

Describe in detail, the material and equipment involved in the accident. Check for guarding, electrical hazards, maintenance and defects. If protective equipment is used in the operation, check it for fit, effectiveness and comfort.

Where?

The context of the accident must be fully recreated in the report. Describe the exact location, as well as such “environmental” factors as noise, lighting, crowding, dusts, or fumes. Note other jobs being carried out in the same area. Pictures of the accident site taken soon after the incident may provide important clues.

When?

Note the date and time, include any relevant details such as, “15 minutes before the shift change,” “from days to nights with no time off,” or “third hour of overtime”. All of these could be an important factor in the accident.

How?

Describe the job process in detail, noting events immediately before, during and after the accident. A review of this description may indicate ways in which the accident could have been prevented or other points in the process where accidents may occur in the future. Ask the injured worker (if he or she can be interviewed) and other workers about near misses that may have occurred.

Why?

Find out all the causes, both direct and indirect. Most accidents are not caused by one thing, but a combination of factors. Be sure to ask about speed-up, supervision, job training, earlier complaints about equipment, and any other non-obvious conditions on the job. Look behind the primary cause, for example, “faulty wiring” and determine what caused it. Remember that victims or witnesses may have difficulty giving an accurate, thorough explanation of the physical condition causing the accident if there is any possibility they will be blamed for it.

Investigation Procedures

Speed and thoroughness are both necessary in investigations. Memories fade and evidence disappears. An immediate investigation will find conditions closest to those existing at the time of the accident. Keep in mind that the witnesses are the experts in their work. Do not be too aggressive in seeking information and do not participate in a “blame the worker” analysis of the accident.

Workplaces should be designed for maximum safety and should therefore, anticipate the possibility of human error.

Recommendations

All accident reports should conclude with recommendations for corrective actions, which should be supported with reasons. The conclusion and recommendations should be discussed by both the Local Union Safety and Health Committee and the Joint Safety and Health Committee, and a timetable for action should be established. The workers involved in the investigation should be informed of any progress. The Safety and Health Representative may want to discuss this problem as part of his/her report to the Local Union membership at the next monthly meeting.

Disease Investigation

Introduction

The investigation of occupational disease is quite different from that of accidents. Acute responses to substances in the workplace, such as dermatitis, are visible; in most cases, the cause can be identified and remedial action can be proposed. Most of the occupational diseases that are killing workers, however, result from chronic exposure to toxic substances and are not identified until many years after initial exposure. Many of these occupational diseases have not been acknowledged as the consequence of workplace exposure to toxic substances; they are assumed to be the “natural” result of the “stress of modern living” or of such lifestyle factors as smoking or drinking. News coverage over the last few years indicates that achieving recognition of occupationally related diseases is a long and frustrating process.

Investigation

You may undertake the investigation as a broad campaign to win recognition of an occupational disease. Demonstrating the relationship between a disease and exposure to a toxic substance is, for many of the reasons described, a painstaking process. Your report must present evidence in a way that satisfies the basic principles of epidemiology.

1. Identify the worker, where he/she worked, and for how long.
2. Identify as precisely as possible the cause of death. If possible, determine whether other diseases were present. The death certificate, autopsy report, and if necessary, hospital records will provide valuable information.
3. Identify the substance to which the worker has been exposed. This may be very difficult to do unless there are some test results available. Often other workers can tell you which substances would likely have been used; and in some cases the work process will have changed and you will have to do historical research.
4. Identify the level of exposure to the toxic substances. In most cases levels of exposure will be unknown, since many workplaces were not monitored in the past. Here other workers and their description of working conditions will provide you with useful information.
5. By now you will have the precise cause of death and the relevant exposure data. Check to ensure that, if the worker died of cancer, the latency requirement has been met.
6. If the disease has already been linked to occupational exposure to a substance, and if the link has been recognized, your case is completed. For most diseases, however, this is not the case, and it is at this point that the really difficult work begins.
7. You should try to find people who worked in the same area, at the same time as the worker you are representing. Are they still alive? Are they well? If some have died, try to find out their cause of death. If they are sick, what disease do they have?

Actions

All of these steps take time and will be difficult. Once your case has been compiled, you should seek advice by involving your Staff Representative. If the connection between exposure and disease appears very clear, you might have a good case for an extensive study of the disease patterns of all exposed workers.

Remember:

- Information can be power, but only if you can find it. Design your filing system in such a way so you can use it, but also that it will be useful to others.

For over 30 years the Investigation Report form 264 was available to all USW Local Unions. Many have used these forms to make their own investigations.

Local Unions have been sending copies of their incident/accident reports to the International Health, Safety and Environment Department. These reports are then reviewed for hazards, which might be occurring in certain industries. In the past we have used this information at OSHA standard setting hearings as evidence for establishing stronger standards. We also have used this information as a basis for our “Hazard Alerts” which we develop internally to communicate with our members. This information is extremely valuable in our continued efforts to reduce or even eliminate accidents on the jobs.

A copy of this redesigned form is attached, please contact your Staff Representative for additional copies.