



Safety is a very big, complex subject for some businesses. I am going to make it a little easier while trying to write a column each week on a different part of occupational health and safety. I chose the title for column as Toolbox Talk. That is a common term for a daily safety meeting of employees and their supervisors where they discuss the safety concerns of the day. I will try and include the latest information, explanations of the current requirements, and try and answer any questions that people may write or e-mail in with.

#### The History of Safety Part 1

Occupational Health and Safety has as long of a history as civilization itself. To understand the roots of safety at the workplace, let's go over a brief bit of history.

In the years 4000-2000 BC, the Egyptians organized 100,000's of workers for the construction of the pyramids. The Egyptians used mostly slave and prisoners for their work, and did not treat them well unless it suited their needs. Under Rameses II, the slaves were introduced to medical services and regular medical examinations for the first time. Their injuries and illnesses were treated by Doctors, and when injured or ill – they were kept separate from others in a building while recovering. Rameses II created an early form of hospital. The workers were also required to have daily baths in the Nile River to keep clean. These things were not done out of concern for the workers, but it was done to ensure sufficiently skilled manpower was available to complete his building project.

The Egyptian doctors also began to document the health problems of the stone masons and potters. The documents, the description of illnesses that affected the respiratory systems of the workers are believed to be the first written case reports. Although not identified by name in these records, silicosis was clearly described and documented by its symptoms. The Egyptian doctors also documented many other commonly known industrial diseases at the time, many of which are still present today.

During the years 2000-1700 BC, the Babylonians developed the Code of Hammurabi to establish standards for wages, obligations of parties and penalties for failure to meet those obligations. King Hammurabi, in his Code, specified what fees would be paid to physicians, sections specifying amounts to be paid for injuries, and what financial penalties would be imposed against those people who injured others. Three of the concepts included in the Code were:

- If a man has caused the loss of a gentleman's eye, his own eye shall be caused to be lost.
- If a builder builds a house for someone, and due to the builder's poor construction the house collapses killing the owner – the builder shall be put to death.
- If a shipbuilder builds a boat for someone, and if in the first year it is not seaworthy, the shipbuilder shall take it apart, make it seaworthy, and put it back together at his own expense.

In 400 BC, Hippocrates is believed to be the first person to recognize and document the toxic effects of workers being exposed to lead, and lead fumes. This would be important health information at a later date.

During 300 BC – 300 AD, the Romans ran their empire using an effective communication and centralized government control system. The Romans recorded the dangers of working with sulphur and zinc. The upper class had much their food prepared, served and eaten off of materials that contained lead. Lead transfers to food and builds up in the human body over time causing serious illness. Lead poisoning, previously identified by Hippocrates, may be one of the reasons for the decline in the birth rate of the Roman Empire, and an increase in mental illness.

In medieval times, master craftsmen used apprentices to pass on their knowledge and skills. It was a lifetime of teaching that made the worker valuable to the employer. The concept that skilled workers are actually valuable to the employer is first realized during this time. It was recognized that workers had to remain safe to ensure that the skills that were needed were not lost due to an accident. The apprentices were taught the earliest known form of safety education as it was in the best interests of the employers, the industry and the workers themselves to remain unhurt and able to work.

Next week, I will continue the brief history of Occupational Health with the second of three parts.

If you have any questions about Occupational Health and Safety, please e-mail them either to this paper or to [bruce@eastidesafety.com](mailto:bruce@eastidesafety.com) I will research them, and try to answer them in this column.

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