Leading Cause of Work-Related Deaths? Occupational Cancer



It’s easy to assume that the leading cause of work-related deaths must be something like falls from heights or confined space incidents.

But according to a study by the Occupational Cancer Research Centre recently published in CMAJ Open, the leading cause of such deaths is actually occupational cancer. The goal of the study was to examine trends in deaths from occupational cancer, high-risk industries and exposures, and commonly compensated categories of occupational cancers.

The researchers used data from the AWCBC on the nature and source of the injury or disease and the industry in which it occurred (by jurisdiction) to describe trends in compensated claims for deaths from occupational cancer in Canada from 1997 to 2010.

The researchers found that compensated claims for deaths from occupational cancer increased in recent years and, in fact, surpassed claims for traumatic injuries and disorders in Canada, particularly in Ontario. Between 1997 and 2010, half of all compensated deaths from occupational cancer in Canada were from Ontario.

This chart shows work-related deaths in Canada for which compensation was received, by year.

Both in Ontario and across Canada, the top three industries in

which claims for deaths from occupational cancer were compensated were:

- Manufacturing
- Construction
- Mining.

But over the last five years of the study period, the number of accepted claims by industry changed, with an increase in the number of claims from workers in government services. This increase was primarily driven by an increase in the number of claims accepted for firefighters, explain the researchers.

Cancer has many causes and a long latency period, which pose serious challenges for workers who file workers' comp claims for an occupationally induced cancer. As a result, occupational cancer is often unrecognized and underreported, claims for compensation go unfiled and accepted claims represent only a small proportion of the overall burden. In addition, occupational diseases, including occupational cancers, get little public attention compared with other causes of work-related deaths.

Bottom line: The results of this study are likely the tip of the iceberg. The researchers recommend increased education of healthcare providers, patients and workers at high risk of exposure to ensure that people with work-related cancers are identified and file claims for compensation.