

# Prospects for the Surveillance of Occupational Illness in Rhode Island

by

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## ABSTRACT

### Prospects for the Surveillance of Occupational Illness in Rhode Island

Occupational illness surveillance is the systematic collection of information on the presence of occupational health hazards and/or their health effects. This information is used to measure the scope of the occupational health problem; to monitor trends in the existence of occupational health hazards and the occurrence of occupational illness; to target certain firms, occupations, or industries as high-risk and/or in need of immediate investigation or future research; and to evaluate the impacts of existing occupational health prevention and control efforts.

Surveillance, therefore, is essential to the promotion of public health; it provides the information necessary to an equitable allocation of scarce resources for the prevention and control of illness. However, adequate and feasible mechanisms for conducting surveillance are not readily available. Existing mechanisms are hampered by the uncertainty involved in identifying occupational illness cases and by the disenfranchisement of workers in our society. Uncertainty gives employers a tool with which to hide the presence of occupational health hazards and the occurrence of occupational illness. Worker disenfranchisement, to which a weak economy and weak regulatory and compensatory mechanisms contribute, prevents the procurement and transfer of information on exposure and health effect. For example, when hazards are uncertain, employers will be less likely to inform workers of hazards and of their rights; workers will be less likely to seek to address uncertain health hazards, be it in terms of seeking medical investigation, compensation, or regulatory enforcement. By the same token, those who might have interests in or mandates to collect the kind of information that would be useful to a surveillance system will be constrained by employers' economic interests in keeping information hidden.

A true surveillance system need not be hampered by questions of uncertainty about individual cases of illness. *Information on uncertain cases can and should be included.* A surveillance system aggregates information; in the aggregate, information on uncertain cases is useful for the identification of areas posing previously unknown or unconfirmed risks. Most current surveillance mechanisms rely on case identification and reporting in which cases are only identified and/or reported, if they are at all, when the identifier is certain that the illness has an occupational etiology.

Given the potential providers of case reports, and given that the current political-economic climate will not significantly change, any attempts at surveillance must work within existing institutions, as opposed to establishing new ones. In addition, since the economic interests of capitalist production constitute such a potent force in our society, surveillance mechanisms must either be as removed from them as possible, or use them to promote the interests of surveillance. Possibilities for the latter exist within the health insurance industry, if certain trends in that industry can be promoted through health care reform. In this scenario, insurance companies would be the collectors and processors of information on occupational health hazards and their effects. A more immediate and concrete prospect, using a traditional public health model for surveillance, is based on physician reporting, since independent physicians are relatively removed from the worker-employer power dynamic. In keeping with this principle, and to further remove physicians from the worker-employer power dynamic, the workers' compensation

implications of occupational illness case identification must be legally and explicitly separated from the identification and reporting of cases by physicians for the purposes of surveillance.

However, questions of feasibility render even these hopes for surveillance tenuous; surveillance of occupational illness in Rhode Island is not foreseeable in the near future. Efforts to promote occupational health through such mechanisms as surveillance may simply need to concentrate on giving workers greater power and generating the political will necessary to bring labor and health interests to the position that they deserve in society's hierarchy of concerns.