

Commercial Cleaners – Australia's Most Unappreciated Silent Asset.

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Introduction

There is a common perception that cleaning is something that anyone can do - for example it requires no skill to empty a bin or mop a floor – as such many regard the cleaning industry as “not that important”. However without the cleaning industry Australia would start to smell within a few days and I note that the cleaning industry is worth \$5 billion annually to the Australian economy. The cleaning industry employs around 70,000 people nationally and is serviced by large multi nationals down to small family based operations (Connolly, 2015).

Most people don't plan cleaning as a career path; it is often something that they fall into in life. Having worked within the cleaning industry for 20 years now, I have formed the opinion that many cleaners are seen as insignificant (marginalised) where sadly when it comes to cleaning, people usually don't notice the job until something isn't done right. Many cleaners are illiterate primarily due to poor education (disenfranchised) where due to family circumstances fair access to a good education was never readily accessible or available. Finally, many cleaners are from a non-English speaking background where cleaning jobs are often the only choice for such minorities.

Over the period 2009-2014, the cleaning industry recorded 15,115 serious musculoskeletal claims with only personal carers (22,815) and truck drivers (17,790) experiencing higher claim levels, this highlights a serious problem with this industry justifying the need for further injury research. The back region is responsible for the highest frequency of serious musculoskeletal disorder claims in Australia at 35.1%, highlighting the need for further research regarding this body part (Safe Work Australia, 2016). Because of the nature of cleaning tasks then manual handling is very difficult to engineer out of every day cleaning activity.

Unfortunately cleaners get injured at work where their future capacity to continue working and earning is very much diminished and this is particularly the case with lower back injury. Workers compensation insurers work hard to resolve the issue at as lower cost as possible and this often results in workers compensation claims being devalued or declined. This leaves the cleaner (and their dependents) out in the cold as due to circumstances mentioned earlier cleaning is the only job they can do – essentially the cleaner may end up unemployable.

One sad example of a cleaner not being appreciated involved a cleaner on an International student visa who was sacked for having a coffee 45 minutes before commencing his shift. He had a good rapport with the building tenants who advised him he was welcome to a cup of coffee when cleaning. With the assistance of his Union the cleaner was awarded \$9,187.20 in damages and the right to have his job back when taking his case to Fair Work Australia. The Union stated that it was *“outrageous that, in Australia, in 2016, a worker is sacked for having a cup of coffee before his shift”*. *“His case is indicative of the exploitation and poor treatment many cleaners experience in Australia”* (Patty, 2016).

My Research

My study focuses upon a large cleaning organisation with close to 700 directly nationally employed full time equivalent cleaners. The studies main aim is primarily to identify hazards within the cleaning industry that may lead to back injuries and present safety measures to reduce the risk of cleaners getting hurt in the first place. Secondly, my research aims to assist injured cleaners make a faster recovery. Some of my research objectives include:

- Understanding how cleaners injure their backs: Exploring five years of incident data within a the study organisation to identify the most common cause of back injury and duration of time off work in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the issues associated with back injury within the industry.

My findings so far identified that that the time within a shift can affect the frequency of muscular injuries where 76 (52.77%) of injuries occurred within the first two hours of a cleaners shift. This is a very significant finding that where strategically addressed may lead to reduced injury.

We commonly warm up for sporting activities but not for working activities. Many research studies have identified the benefits of warm up in reducing the risk of injury. It is strongly recommended that the cleaning industry invest in the practice of 15 minute pre start warm ups that involve a warm up and light stretching program developed by a human movement professional with manual handling of the respective cleaning tasks taken into consideration.

- Understanding the most effective methods of reducing back injury risk: Exploring five years of incident investigations to identify the most common preventative safety controls and correlate these against workers compensation claim files to determine the most effective and preventative safety controls and ascertain why these were most effective.

My findings so far have identified that training is currently the biggest form of safety control hence my results suggest that the cleaning industry should strive for better safety controls like eliminating hazards in the first place. Accepting that training is an industry norm, then my study suggests that more effective training methodology must be better addressed by the cleaning industry. Furthermore, I have formed the opinion that competency based training would be the most effective because one remembers 10% of what they hear, 51% of what they see and hear and finally 92% of what they see and hear and become involved in (Pease, 2007).

- Understanding cleaner knowledge and awareness: To develop and execute a weighted survey upon a target population of cleaners to focus upon and identify deficiencies in their knowledge of general safety and manual handling. This shall identify more effective ways of training cleaners in order to reduce injury.

My findings so far indicate the cleaners could benefit from further training in how to identify manual handling hazards in particular lifting tasks.

Conclusion

In short, if the outcomes of my research prevent just one lifelong debilitating back injury to a cleaner, then the research will be worthwhile.

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