The Unsung Heroes of Workplace Safety

When it comes to safety, not all heroes wear capes. Day in and day out, industrial hygienists tackle the health and safety challenges facing people everywhere including:

1. Indoor air quality, including sick building syndrome and second-hand tobacco smoke
2. Evaluating and controlling environmental lead exposure
3. Emergency response planning and community right-to-know
4. Potentially hazardous agents such as asbestos, pesticides and radon gas
5. Cumulative trauma disorders, including repetitive stress injuries and carpal tunnel syndrome
6. Radiation, including electromagnetic fields and microwaves
7. Detection and control of potential occupational hazards such as noise, radiation and illumination
8. Setting limits on exposure to chemical and physical agents
9. Reproductive health hazards in the workplace
10. Hazardous waste management

Accidents make headlines, but disease can be a bigger threat to workplace safety. Here’s a look at the occupational health pros that are saving lives.

By Dash Lunde

Traumatic injuries aren’t the only danger at work. Silent killers in the form of chemical or biological agents in the workplace can be even more deadly. While approximately 5,000 people per year are fatally injured at work in the U.S., annual deaths from work-related diseases are estimated at 50,000. This is where industrial hygienists (IHs), the unsung heroes of workplace safety, are working to protect health and save lives.

Identifying hazards
Industrial hygiene, also known as occupational health protection, isn’t just about a clean workplace. It’s a wide-ranging field that touches every level of a business in every type of workplace setting.

“Our organization has 40-plus technical committees,” says Larry Sloan, CEO of the American Industrial Hygiene Association (AIHA). “Each one addresses a very unique and specialized occupational stressor: chemical, biological, ergonomic, air quality, radiation, excessive noise…” And recently, IHs have been dealing with the exposure to nano-materials used in new technologies like 3D printing.

Sustainable companies
When IH professionals identify and mitigate risks for employees in their workplace, they also contribute to an overarching business function. “Managing occupational health risks is a crucial part of the larger picture,” says Dr. Steven Lacey, Chair of the Department of Environmental Health Science at the Indiana University Fairbanks School of Public Health. This is why AIHA became a cofounder of the Center for Health and Safety Sustainability. “When you talk about a sustainable organization,” says Sloan, “that can’t be one that doesn’t ensure safe and healthy working conditions for employees or anyone else they come in contact with in the community.” Safety is not just good business sense, but an ethical responsibility of corporations.

The front lines of health
IHs help companies meet their ethical standards and increase workplace productivity, and because we spend so much time at work, IHs are on the front lines of defense in public health. For those looking to make a universal impact, this growing field offers a tremendous opportunity to protect the environment and save lives.