

How WHMIS came to be

By GIL HARDY
Ottawa Bureau
Thomson News Service

OTTAWA — More than three million Canadians are getting the tools to better protect themselves from hazardous materials in the workplace.

The tools are information and training.

The protection comes in the form of the Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System, which ensures employees are getting all the necessary information needed to work safely, says Alan Cotterill, a scientific project officer with the product safety board at Consumer and Corporate Affairs.

"It fulfills the worker's right to know what he's working with and the hazard of that material," Cotterill says. "It provides the worker and the employer with sufficient information to adequately protect the worker from hazardous material and to use the material safely."

WHMIS grew out of a widespread concern that workers deserved to know what they were handling on a daily basis. Provincial governments, occupational health and safety regulators, organized labor and industry all agreed that a national system was needed to identify hazardous material.

"It was the occupational health and safety committee of the Canadian Association of Administrators of Labor Legislators which approached Consumer and Corporate Affairs to use the Hazardous Products Act as the most suitable vehicle to put obligations on the suppliers," Cotterill says.

Six years of discussions were necessary before Bill C-70, which amended the Canada Labor Code and other acts and enacted the Hazardous Materials Information Review Act, was passed by Parliament in June, 1987. But Cotterill says that much time was necessary because so many different groups were involved.

Industry, labor and provincial and

federal governments all had a say in the eventual regulations.

"One of the unique things about WHMIS is that it is a tripartite process. It represents a consensus, so all these parties are partners to WHMIS, they all share ownership of it," says Cotterill.

The federal legislation was passed quickly because all three parties in the Commons agreed with its aim and methods. The law puts the onus on suppliers to provide labelling and information sheets on materials.

The provincial role was to enact legislation requiring employers to provide the information to workers and to educate them.

Federal studies indicate WHMIS will save \$1.33 billion in reduced job-related illness and accidents over 40 years. The system will cost \$833 million to implement, for a net saving of \$493 million.

IMPACT

The same studies looked at the effect WHMIS will have on small bu-

sinesses, which often complain about the burden of government regulations. Cotterill says there will be an impact but not an "undue" one.

Cotterill says the effects of WHMIS will also be felt in the agricultural industry.

"Farms are considered to be workplaces and some of the products used by farmers will be subject to WHMIS."

These could include such materials as fertilizers if they meet the hazardous criteria laid out in the controlled products regulations, which are part of the system.

Animal feeds that may contain drugs are exempt from WHMIS because they fall under the Food and Drug Act.

Explosives and other material subject to safety-related legislation such as the Pest Control Act and the Food and Drug Act are also exempt.

The enabling legislation provides for a review of these exemptions in 1990. WHMIS itself will be evaluated

in a few years to see how it is functioning.

The legislation also created a Hazardous Materials Information Review Commission headed by Claude St-Pierre, director of workplace hygiene for Quebec's Occupational Health and Safety Commission.

The review commission is an independent body that hears submissions from employers and suppliers seeking exemption from WHMIS reporting and disclosure requirements. It is expected to deal primarily with requests for exemptions under the legislation's mechanism to protect trade secrets.

Cotterill says the chemical industry will be most directly affected by WHMIS. But the system's reach extends well beyond a single industry.

"It's a very broad effect. All workplaces where people are exposed to hazardous material will feel the impact."

Joint effort

WHMIS was not developed on a whim.

WHMIS regulations in each province are based on a federally developed model.

Provincial governments, the federal government and occupational health and safety agencies, consulting with labor and business, developed the model provincial WHMIS regulations are based on.

While many regulations are the same across the country, some provincial regulations do vary, in areas such as the amount of fines for employers who break the regulations.

Benefits outweigh costs say local firms

By DONNA KELL
Herald Staff

As of today (March 15) the federal government has imposed legislation to protect employees working with hazardous materials in the workplace.

WHMIS (Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System) is a labelling and general information system designed to prevent accidents and to inform workers of potential dangers involved in using chemicals and other hazardous materials.

Substances must be labelled under the new law, and dangers to eyes, skin and other susceptible parts must be outlined through symbols on the labels. Material Safety Data Sheets (MSDS) must be posted where employees can reach them. The MSDS will provide information on both the material being work-

ed with and its potential hazards.

Four government videos were issued to employers under WHMIS. The videos involve a general information regarding what hazardous materials can do, like when something can potentially explode, what materials never to leave in the hot sun, and why a container should be closely monitored for their contents.

While only employees working with hazardous materials viewed all four films, a more general film was viewed by employees not in direct contact with the hazardous material.

"The onus will be on the people in the workplace," said PG Bell Manufacturing Manager Sidney Miedema.

He said he hopes the system

would prevent absenteeism in the long run although it takes time and money to implement right now.

Curwood Manufacturing Ltd., named Georgetown's Business of the Year for 1988 by the Chamber of Commerce, has had its labelling and information system in place since Nov. 2, months before the government's March deadline, says a company spokesman.

"We had to do a complete cradle to grave investigation" beginning in the summer, said Gary Gabet, Curwood's personnel supervisor.

"It's a costly program, but I think the benefits to the employee far outweigh the costs," he said.

Mr. Gabet said his company has eliminated one substance

thought to have "long-term chronic health effects." Methyl ethyl ketone (MEK) was scrapped by Curwood six weeks ago, he said.

Mr. Gabet said most employees were "receptive" to WHMIS and offered suggestions for ventilation and labelling.

"The general reaction was very positive," he said.

Curwood uses "a variety of solvents and inks" in their company of 150 employees.

Another large Halton Hills company, Varian Canada Ltd. on River Drive, has taken a gradual approach to the government legislation.

"We've been dealing with this since 1985," said Jan Kron, Human Resources manager. "It's been a very smooth transition for us."

Ms. Kron said Varian has been informed of trends in safety legislation by following legisla-

tion on the Transportation of Dangerous Goods and the 1985 provincial government's Spills bill. WHMIS, she said, is operating in conjunction with a provincial law called The Right to Know legislation.

"We use a lot of chemicals here," said Ms. Kron. "I guess (the WHMIS legislation) has been a shock to many companies," but not to Varian, she said.

And Varian doesn't resent government officials looking over their shoulders and lurking in the hallways while WHMIS gets rolling in Ontario.

"It's a new program to employees and it needs continual reinforcement," said Ms. Kron.

Information important for protection

"It's like wearing glasses. At first, they feel clumsy and awkward and they don't feel part of you. After awhile you feel naked without them."

The metaphorical glasses referred to by local manufacturing manager Sidney Miedema are the guidelines of the new government safety program. WHMIS, short for Workplace Hazardous Materials Information System, was recently approved at the federal government level.

Mr. Miedema of PG Bell Division of Jannock Metal Fabricating, said although the

program is costly both in terms of money and hours, like anything corrective, it takes an investment and requires some adjustment.

The cost is, he said, "all borne by the company," but this is a necessary evil.

"It's an extra burden, it's an extra cost that will have to be passed on to the consumer. But information is always a good thing to protect people," he said.

In the short run, there will be expenditures, but in the long run, money could be saved as employees take less time off for hazardous material-related illness, he said.

The government's education of workers should begin in the schools, said Mr. Miedema. Children exposed early to chemical safety will make it a way of life, he said.

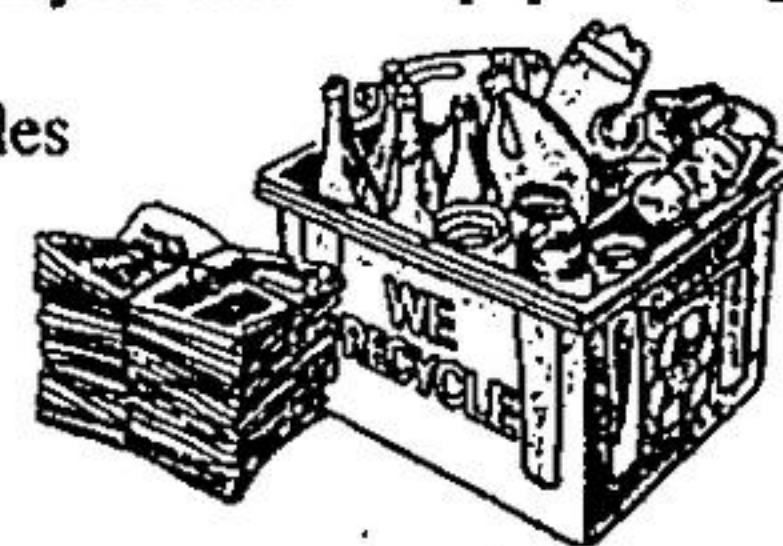
And although funds are required to implement the system of data sheets, labels and employee training for WHMIS, Mr. Miedema believes that the government has taken a fair approach.

"All companies are on the same level," he said. All companies are paying to implement the program at the same time for the March 15 deadline.

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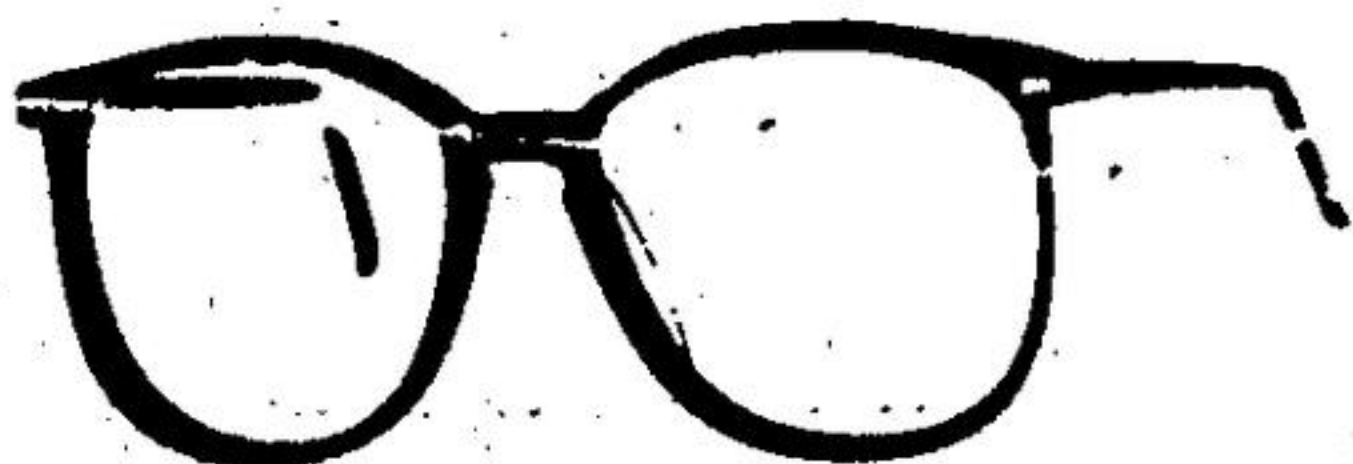
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