Cancer and Occupational Injury: Some instructive connections

A few weeks ago I received unexpected, grim, and shocking news – I have cancer! I tell you this – not for pity or sympathy – but because of the insight I've gained from dealing with this life-threatening diagnosis. The similarities and differences between cancer and occupational injury offer some valuable lessons for safety leaders.

It Won't Happen to Me

I was overwhelmed with optimism as I waited for my urologist to reveal the results of the biopsy. The leading indicators gave me a 1 in 5, or 20% chance of having prostate cancer. But those statistics were based on the average 60-year old. I considered myself much less at-risk for cancer than the average person, because I don't smoke or consume much alcohol, and I eat very little red meat. I exercise regularly and take antioxidant vitamins daily. Furthermore, I eat a lot of tomatoes (which contain lycopene – a presumed protector against prostate cancer), and I spend a lot of time in the sun, providing me plenty of vitamin D (another presumed protector against this type of cancer).

I've done everything I know I can do to prevent this relatively common type of cancer. Therefore, my cancer must be an "accident," not only because it was unintentional but because it was unexpected and nonpreventable with my current knowledge, tools, and methods.

So what's the connection to safety? First, we don't expect a workplace injury to happen to us. Yet, ask yourself this question. Are all occupational injuries preventable, meaning we know enough to prevent all of them? Certainly not; yet some are preventable within our bounds of knowledge. In fact, numerous injuries are prevented every day because we know the contributing factors and we eliminate or modify them. However, some workplace injuries are not preventable at the time of their occurrence because the contributing environmental or behavioral factors were not realized, understood, nor controlled. These are "accidents."

Bottom line: It's unfair to call all unintentional injuries "accidents" and to give one statistic for a company's total recordable injury rate (TRIR). If the factors contributing to an injury were known beforehand, the incident was controllable and could have been prevented. In this case, safety management is an execution problem. All of these injuries are preventable.

Like my cancer, however, some injuries are not preventable at the time they occur. All of the contributing factors were not known and thus were not controllable. These are accidents. The challenge of safety management is to identify the unknown factors and figure out how to control them. This requires open and candid conversation with everyone involved in the incident, both directly and indirectly.

The Perception of Personal Risk

Cancer is scary because many of its contributing factors are unknown or uncontrollable (as in the genetics that likely contributed to my current plight). Accidental injury can be as devastating as cancer, and equally terrifying. And,

workers are more likely to endure serious occupational injuries than they are to develop cancer. But, society is seemingly much more concerned about cancer than occupational injury.

How we talk about "accidents" is part of the problem. Many companies include the slogan "all accidents are preventable" in their mission statement. This implies we know enough to eliminate all contributing factors to all injuries and property-damage incidents; that there are no unknown or uncontrollable factors, as there are in cancer. As a result, we fear cancer more than accidents.

Bottom line: Safety pros should emphasize the unknown quantity in accident prevention. There is a lot we don't know about safety management and injury prevention, and therefore "accidents will happen." Through careful analysis of the accident we can define the environmental, behavioral, and personal factors that need to change in order to prevent future mishaps. Then we need to empirically and objectively evaluate corrective action plans designed to affect such change. Since all of this is easier said than done, there is always the possibility of an "accident." That should raise our perception of personal risk and motivate enthusiastic participation in efforts to reduce the unknown factors contributing to unintentional injury.

The Power of Personal Control

Hearing the results of my biopsy was debilitating. I felt distressed and helpless. At the dinner table, I announced, "Well I guess it's just my time. I've lived an active 60 years, and have seen enough of this life." Then, my 23-year-old daughter retorted, with tears streaming down her face, "But Dad, you haven't seen enough of me."

My daughter's words brought me to my senses. Why am I giving up? I can fight this thing. Famous people like Lance Armstrong, Mayor Rudy Giuliani, and General Norman Schwarzkopf have come back strong after a cancer diagnosis – I can too! I began reading books and internet information about prostate cancer, eventually deciding removal of the prostate is the best therapeutic approach for me. I scheduled surgery with a urologist who has performed over 350 radical retropubic nerve-sparing prostatectomies.

As soon as I did everything possible to get in control of my problem, I felt much better. Hopefulness took the place of helplessness; motivating stress overcame debilitating distress. We need to make similar transformations in industrial safety.

I hear many workers talk about injury-prevention efforts as "flavor-of-the-month" programs. "It's about being lucky," they say, "When it's your time, it's your time." Such apathy is actually supported by certain safety management practices. For example, when companies only measure their safety performance with reactive outcomes like TRIR, they hold people accountable for numbers they don't believe they completely control. And offering incentives to keep such group statistics down only makes matters worse, as people are then less likely to report minor incidents so they don't become the person who spoiled it for everyone. These relatively minor incidents should always be reported and talked about, as they are opportunities to learn about the risk factors and to design proactive interventions.

Bottom line: A work culture that focuses proactively on what people can do each day to prevent injuries reduces worker indifference to occupational safety. And if an open, willing-to-learn perspective is maintained whenever an unintentional injury occurs, proactive action is promoted over reactive inaction. Activating stress substitutes for paralyzing distress. Next month, I'll explain how this beneficial transformation is inhibited by a "root-cause investigation."

The Power of Social Support

The sense of personal control over my disease would not have occurred without social support. My family reassured me, with words like "We'll help you get through this." My graduate students brought me relevant books and internet material. My department chairman gave me contact information for reputable urologists. My SPS partners offered me optimism, including encouraging stories of their family members who have survived prostate cancer. Students in my university classes sent me e-mails to express appreciation for my teaching and to wish me success in overcoming my setback. At the end of several classes, students approached me with words of sincere concern and comfort. Some gave me a hug, and a few actually prayed aloud.

Research has shown over and over that social support is critical for overcoming physical illness and emotional conflict. Now I have experienced this firsthand. Through social support I received the information and the inspiration to gain personal control. Indeed, without substantial social support I could not endure the intense and prolonged treatment ordeal required to fight my disease – nor would I want to. Without family, peers, and colleagues rooting for me, it's unlikely I'd maintain sufficient motivation and courage to become a long-term cancer survivor.

The relevance to occupational safety is obvious. We need social support to achieve and maintain an injury-free workplace. Personal injury is not preventable without the continual involvement of others. We need coworkers to identify and remove environmental hazards, to give us feedback when we are mindlessly at-risk, to assure us our routine work is worthwhile, to praise us when we go beyond the call of duty for safety, and to help us implement and evaluate safety-improvement methods and interventions.

Is it more difficult to get social support to fight workplace injuries than cancer? Unfortunately, the answer is "Yes" for many corporate cultures. Both problems are personal and both require advice, feedback, and encouragement from others. Yet, such interpersonal assistance is often hard to come by for industrial safety. This would not be the case if workers were as fearful of a workplace injury as they are of cancer; if they were aware of the critical service they and others can provide in preventing personal injury; and if workplace processes *facilitated* group collaboration and interpersonal conversation about safety-related issues.

In Conclusion

The most important lesson I've learned from my current burden with cancer has been that there is a great amount of social support available when we need it, if we are willing to ask for help. As someone once said, "The winds of grace are always blowing, but you have to raise the sail." I raised my sail a few

weeks ago with an announcement of being diagnosed with prostate cancer. Then I received a remarkable amount of genuine caring, concern, and support. All of a sudden, friends, colleagues and students expressed appreciation for my daily contributions as a teacher and researcher, along with strong sentiment and hope that I will be able to continue my worthwhile work.

We typically don't get the same amount of social support for occupational safety. We don't feel vulnerable to a workplace injury, especially with the perception that all injuries are preventable. And, we are reluctant to offer safety-related assistance to others unless we get a direct request. Thus, our challenge is to convince people that injury control is more difficult than it looks, and that we need assistance from others in identifying and removing potential contributors to a workplace injury, including environmental hazards and at-risk behaviors. Bottom line: The necessary assistance to achieve an injury-free workplace is readily available upon request. But, people must perceive the need and ask for social support.

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