

# Occupational Health Nurses focus on zero workplace injuries

Health and safety in the workplace is key

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POSTMEDIA CONTENT WORKS

Workplace safety has been something that has been a concern to labourers, tradespeople and professionals since the industrial revolution, but a Worker's Compensation Board report released a few years ago served to be eye opening. In 2012, Saskatchewan's workplace death toll was the highest it had been on over 30 years. With a shocking 60 fatalities, the province held a ranking of second worst province in Canada for workplace safety.

## STRIVING FOR CHANGE

Since then, a determination to change things has resulted in improvements to the ranking. Over the next two years the numbers of incidents dropped. Although still almost twice the national average for time loss claims, Saskatchewan's numbers had decreased to 2.41 per cent. Workplace injuries were also down from 7.80 per cent in 2013 to 6.99 per cent in 2014. Awareness campaigns such as

*Mission: Zero* have brought the need for a safe and healthy work environment to the forefront. Although conditions for many have gotten better, there is always room for improvement, no matter what the occupation. By offering preventative services in the workplace, many times the demands for emergency and other medical services can be kept to a minimum.

## PROFESSIONALS WHO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

This renewed awareness has resulted in a demand for Occupational Health Nurses (OHN) in the workplace to assist in creating a safer and healthier work environment.

According to the Canadian Occupational Health Nurses Association, an OHN is a registered nurse who is practicing in the specialty of Occupational Health and Safety. The OHN delivers integrated services to individual workers and worker populations. Occupational health nursing encompasses the promotion, maintenance and restoration of health and the preven-



An awareness of the need to create a safe and healthy work environment has resulted in a demand for Occupational Health Nurses in the workplace. Occupational health nursing encompasses the promotion, maintenance and restoration of health and the prevention of illness and injury. PHOTO: FOTOLIA

tion of illness and injury.

The role of the OHN can be a very broad one. They can offer education to employers, safety training and support to employees, onsite treatment when needed, bring attention to any workplace hazards and much more.

## THE OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH NURSING PROGRAM

As a result of the increased demand for OHN professionals, Saskatchewan Polytechnic's School of Nursing has introduced the Occupational Health Nurse Program to help meet this demand.

Lauren Larson, Continuing Education Consultant for the School of Nursing at Saskatchewan Polytechnic, states that the OHN program is a post-graduate certificate program.

"As an adult learning program, students can enter the program and leave at their own pace," she explained. This program is particularly appealing to registered nurses who are already working in a workplace setting or are look-

ing to expand their career options.

The first intake for students of the program takes place in May, 2016. After this, intake periods will take place every year in January, May and September.

The program offers eight courses, a simulated lab and a workplace practicum where participants are mentored by professionals who are working in an occupational health environment. The practicum is a valuable tool which provides students with hands-on field experience.

Larson adds that Saskatchewan Polytechnic is pleased to offer a strong faculty that is professional and experienced in the occupational health industry.

Health and wellness in the workplace is the key theme throughout the studies focusing on the overall well-being of employees within a number of circumstances. Professionals who are taking part in the OHN program will acquire a great deal of knowledge and skills that will equip them for a variety of situations, such as assessing the physical and mental health and well-being of workers, inspecting work areas for potential accidents,

conducting investigations when accidents happen, being aware of safety hazards and communicating about them to the appropriate people on the job site.

Once completed, students are then prepared to write the Canadian Occupational Health and Safety exam for even further credibility in their chosen profession.

## FOCUSING ON ACHIEVING THE GOAL

With a province-wide goal of attaining zero work injuries, more and more employers are looking at having OHNs in the workplace. These dedicated professionals provide their expertise and guidance to assist in achieving this goal through preventative methods first. Regardless of what type of workplace it is, for the OHN, the motivation is always to make certain that everyone goes home to their families safe and sound at the end of the day.

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# The fast track to success

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The first participants in a new option to complete the Saskatchewan Collaborative Bachelor of Science in Nursing (SCBScN) program are moving into the final lap as they work to complete their final year of education. The University of Regina and Saskatchewan Polytechnic offer, in partnership, the SCBScN – a four year nursing degree program available in Regina, Saskatoon and Swift Current. Graduates of the SCBScN program go on to seek licensure as a RN.

The LPN to RN (LPN2RN) Option facilitates a licensed practical nurse (LPN) to fast track their education through the SCBScN program by providing credit for their previous LPN education. LPNs who complete the LPN2RN Option earn a Bachelor of Science in Nursing and go on to write the national licensing exam to become an RN. Through this option, graduates of Saskatchewan Polytechnic's Practical Nursing diploma program (since 2008) are able to complete the program in 24 months (six terms) rather than the usual 48 months (8 terms).

"This is a great solution for those LPNs who wish to pursue their degree while working in the healthcare environment," said Christa

MacLean, SCBScN program head, Saskatchewan Polytechnic.

Dr. Robin Evans, associate dean, Faculty of Nursing at the University of Regina said the LPN2RN Option is in response to requests by LPNs to receive credit for classes they've already taken and to decrease the length of time it takes to complete a nursing degree program.

"LPNs entering the nursing degree program were asking about transfer credits in recognition of prior learning. Given that we now teach courses year-round, including the summer months, we were able to create an education pathway that enabled the LPNs to accelerate through the SCBScN program," said Evans.

Research to determine the need for the program and bring a student-oriented approach began two years ago. A team of faculty from both institutions worked together to examine applicable transfer credits from Saskatchewan Polytechnic's Practical Nursing program (for those graduates 2008 or later) and found that students could be credited for almost the entire first year of the SCBScN program, as well as two second year courses.

"We carefully examined curriculum to make sure elements of the Practical Nursing program clinical

experience were considered and established provisions for priority entrance into the upper years of the SCBScN program," MacLean said.

The first 20 students, 11 in Regina and nine in Saskatoon, began their studies last fall and are poised to move into the second year of study, which will be the final year needed to obtain their nursing degree.

"The nice thing about the LPN2RN option is they get to go straight through the program. That's what they're really excited about because they can accelerate. They go to school over two summers so they're done earlier," said Evans.

The program is available to both newly-graduated LPNs and those already working in health care. MacLean said LPNs bring valuable backgrounds and experience to the program and to the health care system.

While faculty will continue work with students to evaluate the program, it's already apparent it's going to continue, with Evans saying reaction to the program has been very positive.

"We've had a record number of LPNs applying. It's very popular," said Evans. With the first set of students moving into their final year, the fast track to success is wide open to Saskatchewan LPNs.

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