

Occupational Exposure Limits: Their Critical Role in Preventive Medicine and Risk Management

In the January issue of this journal, Eileen Senn Tarlau offered a thought-provoking discussion of the potential benefits of eliminating all occupational exposure limits (OELs).⁽¹⁾ It often takes such controversial writings to make us reflect on the importance of certain fundamental beliefs one may assume are embraced by virtually all health professionals. Her discussion has made a number of us aware of how far short we have fallen in communicating the merits of the Threshold Limit Values (TLVs®), as well as other OELs.

As one who has spent over 15 years studying the basis for the TLVs, contributing to the establishment of the American Industrial Hygiene Association (AIHA) Workplace Environmental Exposure Levels (WEELs) as a committee member, co-founding the AIHA Unusual Workshifts Committee, and publishing a number of papers on the subject of OELs and health risk assessment, I am concerned about the potential consequences of some of Ms. Tarlau's claims and suggestions. She, as well as Castleman and Ziem^(2,3) (the apparent source of much of her information), has raised a number of critical issues which bring into question the ethics and conduct of some of the pioneers of industrial hygiene, their employers, and the American Conference of Governmental Industrial Hygienists (ACGIH) TLV committee. She has also challenged fundamental principles of toxicology and risk assessment. In support of her suggestion, she cites risk assessment calculations, and alleges conflicts of interest and a lack of a scientific method used to set OELs. Since abandoning the TLVs and other OELs is a radical suggestion, each of her points deserves scrutiny.