

Garbage collection is “one of the most hazardous jobs”

Garbage collector Jamie Thompson was picking up trash one day last summer when blood started flowing from his forearm, which had been punctured by a broken wine glass in a curbside garbage bag. The deep cut pierced a vein, required six stitches and kept the St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, worker off the job for two weeks.

Two months later in Ottawa, Ontario, sanitation worker Rocco D'Angelo died after being accidentally struck by a sport utility vehicle while on his pickup route in the city's south end.

While garbage collection may not seem like a hazardous job, Canadian industry officials say that it can pose health and safety risks that keep hundreds of the country's almost 35 000 waste collectors off the job at any given time.

Deaths in the occupation are rare, but ergonomic injuries, such as back strain, are commonplace and cuts from sharp objects and exposure to bacteria and toxins are always a threat, says Troy Winters, a senior health and safety officer at the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE).

“If you're on the job for five years ... I would say it's a pretty safe statement that you're going to get some kind of injury,” says Winters. He says he knows of no Canadian statistics on the health problems associated with garbage collection.

In a 2010 report, CUPE described garbage collection as “one of the most hazardous jobs,” with injuries of some sort afflicting 35% of garbage collectors each year. CUPE is the biggest union representing sanitation workers who are employed by municipalities. But publicly employed garbage collectors accounted for only about 20% of the country's waste collectors in 2007,

according to Statistics Canada. The majority of these workers are employed by private companies.

John Foley, general manager of the private collection company Tomlinson

Canadian research is sparse. Jacques Lavoie, an industrial hygiene specialist at the Institut de recherche Robert-Sauvé en santé et en sécurité du travail (IRSST), a nonprofit health and safety research organization in Montréal, Quebec, studied about 30 Quebec garbage workers to determine the extent of their exposure to bacteria and fungi (*Sci Total Environ* 2006;370:23-8). The study concluded that garbage collectors face a moderate risk that is about 10 times less than the health threat to farmers.

In a separate 2002 IRSST report, Lavoie and colleagues evaluated the range of health and safety risks facing trash collectors, and determined that the biggest threat is ergo-

nommic injuries, followed by cuts, and then exposure to micro-organisms. Exposure to vehicle fumes rated fourth. Collecting compost posed more of a bacterial health threat than garbage collection because compost is more concentrated, says Lavoie. None of the risk factors, however, were considered to be serious and could be countered by such measures as using automated trucks and wearing protective gear, says Lavoie.

It's industry practice, say Foley and Winters, to minimize health and safety risks by wearing protective clothing such as leather gloves, long pants and heavy boots, preferably steel-toed. Collectors should keep up to date on tetanus and hepatitis immunizations, and practice safe garbage collection by testing the weight of garbage before lifting it, using two hands, and, when available, using a garbage truck's automated loading system for heavy bins containing compost and recycling. — Janice Tibbetts, Ottawa, Ont.



Workers minimize health and safety risks by wearing protective gear and, when available, using a garbage truck's automated loading system for heavy bins.

Environmental Services, agrees with Winters that “wear and tear” on the body is by far the biggest threat to garbage collectors, each of whom picks up 4000 to 5000 bags or cans of garbage daily. At any one time, at least one of Foley's approximately 80 garbage collectors is sidelined to “light duty work” such as driving the truck because of job-incurred injuries, he says.

“I wouldn't say it's considered to be a risky job, but there are risks,” says Foley, whose collectors pick up garbage in seven Eastern Ontario municipalities.

He says he knows of a handful of collectors who have been stuck by needles and, as a precaution, underwent azidothymidine (AZT) treatment to reduce the risk of HIV infection.

In the United States, garbage collection was rated as the seventh most dangerous job in 2010, the last year for which statistics are available. The Bureau of Labor Statistics bases its results on the number of deaths on the job. Waste collection had a mortality rate of 30 per 100 000 workers that year.

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