



CAUTION

# SLIPPERY SLOPE

By Nestor E. Arellano

Each time Wayne De L'Orme speaks about slips, trips and falls, he is reminded of an incident some eight years ago when a young worker clearing up debris on the third floor of a construction site fell to her death because of a poorly bolted barrier.

All the workers knew about the unstable barrier, but the woman was unaware of the unmarked hazard. She must have slipped on a piece of debris, tried to regain her balance of the unfastened barrier and fell to her death on the floor below, said De L'Orme, office director of the Industrial Health and Safety unit of Ontario's Ministry of Labour.

"It was a needless death. A simple sign or workers taking the time to secure the barrier could have easily prevented it," recounts the 20-year labour ministry veteran.

For De L'Orme the woman's death underscores the daily dangers that slips, trips and falls pose to almost any one. "She bore an uncanny resemblance to my young daughter, and I

guess that sends a message to me that our negligence in the workplace can mean danger to anyone."

No less than 60,000 workers are injured each year due to slips, trips and falls (STF), according to statistics from the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety. This number represents about 15 per cent of all time-loss injuries accepted by workers' compensation boards or commissions across the country.

Apart from pain and sorrow that fatalities and injuries cause, these accidents are also a financial drain, according to Sandro Perruzza, chief of client service for the Ontario Workplace Safety and Prevention Services (WSPS).

In Ontario, which is one of Canada's most expensive provinces, there are about 17,000 STF incidents each year. About 10 of those incidents result in death.

The average cost of an STF incident is \$3,500 in direct Workplace Safety and Insurance Board (WSIB) costs and as much as \$21,000 in indirect costs, which include work-

Low-level falls are one of the major causes of fall-related injuries among workers. Stop slips and trips before they stop you.

er and equipment replacement, downtime, legal expenses and other expenditures.

"So, if a company has a five per cent profit margin, the amount of sales it needs to generate in order to recover the cost of a single STF injury is in the order of \$420,000," said Perruzza.

### Preventable

While STFs are among the most common causes of injuries in the workplace, they are also among the most easily preventable. "STFs need not occur with such staggering frequency. But they do because many managers, supervisors and workers are not mindful or aware of where incidents are likely to happen and cause injuries," Perruzza said.

He listed three things that workplace managers, supervisors and workers should do:

- Understand how fall accidents happen
- Identify the trouble area
- Eliminate or minimize



### STF hazards

Slips occur when there is too little friction or traction between the footwear and walking surface, according to Michael Chappell, provincial coordinator of the Construction Health and Safety Program of the Ontario Ministry of Labour.

Chappell said slips are likely to happen in work areas that have the following conditions:

- Wet or oily surfaces
- Occasional spills
- Weather hazards, such as snow and ice
- Loose and unanchored rugs or mats
- Very smooth or slippery surfaces

Trips happen when a person's foot or feet strike or hit an object and cause the individual to lose balance and eventually fall. Common causes are:

- Obstructed view
- Poor lighting
- Cluttered walkways
- Wrinkled carpeting
- Cables or equipment
- Uneven surfaces

These conditions are seemingly easy to identify. However, more often than not, in a busy workplace they are typically overlooked, said Chappell.

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stairs, ramps, walkways, driveways and parking lots reasonably safe for persons using them.

Who is held liable depends on the circumstances of the loss, the bureau said. The following are some of the criteria used to determine whether or not the appropriate standard of care were applied, according to the IBC:

- Whether the danger was foreseeable
- Whether the occupier's conduct was in accordance with acceptable standards of practice
- Whether there was an adequate system of inspection in place and carried out
- Whether the danger was allowed to exist for an unreasonable amount of time
- The ease with which the danger could have been prevented

Should an accident occur in the workplace and subsequent investigations reveal that precautions were not taken to prevent the accident, the company itself, or officials of the business, or owners of the property could be held liable. "At the high end, individuals or legal entities could be taken to court and made to pay up to a maximum of \$500,000 per offence, if found guilty," said De L'Orme.

At the very least, the health and safety director said, a business's operations could be ordered suspended while investigations are ongoing or while the company has not complied with a court decision, such as orders to remedy a workplace hazard.

Even this could be bad news for many businesses, he said. "For a lot of companies, especially in the SMB sector even the closure of one or

two days could impact productivity. Investigations could tie-up key personnel and could mean loss income."

If an STF ends up in the media, the negative publicity could also affect the public image of a company, De L'Orme pointed out. "A company trying to differentiate itself through the quality of its work or its processes could end up tainted," he said.

### Best practices

The workplace health and safety experts we interviewed said that most accidents can be avoided by putting in place practical safety policies and practices and making sure they are followed. Here are some of the basics:

- Ensure that managers, supervisors and employees are aware of the health and safety regulations governing the business;
- Take the time to adequately educate and train personnel on the appropriate safety procedures. Make sure this training is regularly revisited and that safety drills are carried out;
- Designate teams (or in a smaller organization, even just one individual) to regularly scan the area and identify potential hazards at least before and after each shift;
- Hazards should be remediated as soon as possible. If not, ensure that adequate and visible warning signs (easily understood by everyone) are placed in the area or on the equipment or structure of interest. Consider placing barriers to prevent workers and non-workers from straying near the danger zone;
- If the hazard involves structures that the property owner should

remediate, such as a dangerous stairs or poorly lit areas, make sure that the property manager is informed right away and that this communication is duly recorded.

Apart from general good housekeeping measures, workplace safety teams should also focus on the following, according to the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety:

**Flooring** — Investigate if walking surfaces require modification to prevent slips and trips. Floors can be recoated or replaced. Mats or pressure sensitive abrasive strips, or abrasive-filled paint, or synthetic decking can be installed to add traction to the surface.

**Footwear** — Not all walking surfaces are the same. Some may be oily while others may be wet or gravelly. Make sure that workers use the right footwear that provides the appropriate anti-slip capabilities for the work environment. Proper fitting footwear also reduces fatigue and helps prevent workers from slipping.

Workers can also reduce the risk of slipping by taking the time to pay attention to what they are doing and their environment. Most of these safety tips involve common sense, but unfortunately they often "fly under the radar" because people are just too busy to pay attention, said De L'Orme.

"It is an employer's responsibility to provide a safe work environment for all employees. But workers should look after their own safety too," he said. **CCO**

"STFs continue to be among the biggest source of injuries because all too often these conditions are neglected," he said. "Many workplaces do not have any system in place to identify these hazards when they crop up.

"Neglect and lack of oversight open up a lot of businesses to possible legal liabilities," said Chappell.

### Legal responsibilities

Different jurisdictions across the country have varying regulations regarding STFs and workplace safety, but generally they place the burden of responsibility on three main entities, according to De L'Orme of the Ministry of Labour.

"Generally employers, managers and the property owner have some form of legal obligation to take all preventive measures to prevent accidents in the premises," he said.

In cases where there is more than one occupier of a property (such as a landlord and a tenant or several tenants) it is possible for liability to be shared, according to the Insurance Bureau of Canada (IBC).

According to the IBC, as far as workplace safety is concerned, occupiers of a building or property are required to keep areas such as aisles,

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