

Recommendation # 4: Revisions of the Occupational Questionnaire (OHQ)

The Advisory Board made several specific recommendations for revision of the current occupational history questionnaire at the April 2017 meeting. The DOL response to the Advisory Board's recommendation contains the following specific points:

1. OWCP has already developed a revised OHQ that :
 - Provides space for workers to provide free text descriptions of how they were exposed.
 - Provides space to record union membership and participation in a Former Worker Program.
 - Reduces the lists of toxic substances and instead lists categories under which the claimant may provide specific toxic substances.
2. OWCP did not accept the Board's recommendation to add a section on reported exposure to vapors, gases, dust, and fumes (VGDF) based on the following reasoning:
 - EEOICPA specifically states that a condition can only be accepted as a compensable covered illness if it is at least as likely as not that exposure to a specific toxic substance was related to employment at a Department of Energy facility.
 - The program has defined a 'toxic substance' -- as "any material that has the potential to cause illness or death because of its radioactive, chemical, or biological nature".
 - VGDF lexicon is a broad reference that encompasses many different specific toxic substances that exist in either occupational or non-occupational settings.

The Advisory Board discussed the OHQ recommendations and the OWCP response in detail at the meeting held in November 2017. The Board's recommendation to add questions concerning VGDF exposures is tied to the recommended presumption for COPD and will be addressed in the responses to the COPD recommended presumption.

The Advisory Board's recommended OHQ revisions are closely tied with other recommendations intended to improve the quality of claimant-provided exposure information and use of this information during claim adjudication. These other Advisory Board recommendations include: 1) use of former DOE workers to assist claimants in completing the OHQ and 2) providing industrial hygienist the opportunity to speak directly with claimants to clarify information provided in the OHQ.

The Advisory Board was provided and did review the revised draft of the OHQ in the process of developing its specific OHQ recommendations. The Board does not consider the draft OHQ to be a significant improvement over what is currently being used. The draft OHQ is largely a form that allows the claimant space for recording free text descriptions of their exposures. While recording free text descriptions of work performed is helpful, the draft OHQ does not provide

sufficient structure and ‘memory triggers’ to help claimants recall specific tasks and exposures at DOE sites. Experience gained through the Former Worker Programs including the Building Trades National Medical Screening Program (BTMed) has shown that listings of materials and tasks on the OHQ provide memory triggers often useful in stimulating recall of exposures that may have occurred decades in the past. Furthermore, industrial hygienists use tasks and materials collectively as predictors of exposure and exposure intensity. In addition to asking about materials and tasks, the Advisory Board recommended that a scale of task frequency be included on the OHQ. The BTMed program has found that tasks and task frequency by job, in combination with job duration, can be used to generate exposure indices that are predictive of risk for occupational diseases such as pulmonary fibrosis and COPD.

The Advisory Board acknowledges that the BTMed list of tasks is largely specific to construction and maintenance workers. A similar list is not available for production workers and production tasks are likely to be substantially different by DOE site. Acknowledging this limitation, the Advisory Board recommended that the OHQ provide space to record free text descriptions of tasks associated with recorded exposures. This would allow industrial hygienists reviewing the claimant file better information to assess the likely range of exposure intensity. Additionally, this free text description could provide a useful flag to industrial hygienists when the task description is insufficient and discussion with the claimant for clarification is needed.