

Newfoundland and Labrador

A crabby life

Workers in snow crab processing plants are prone to accidents, repetitive strain injuries and to other work-related illnesses

by Della Knee

Della Knee has been working at Beothic Fish Processors Limited in Valleyfield, Newfoundland, a snow crab processing plant, for the past 10 seasons

New-Wes-Valley, Bonavista Bay, consists of a number of adjacent, small sub-communities located on the east coast of Newfoundland. In the community of Valleyfield, you will find a fish processing business that has been around for over 30 years—Beothic Fish Processors Limited (BFPL). At Beothic, we have a multi-species plant, a very modern and growing place. Workers are a very important factor when you look at the success of this establishment. The consideration for the workers at BFPL is second to none.

The snow crab processing plant at BFPL is state-of-the-art and is a very good place to work. However, we have watched our work hours decline dramatically in the crab processing area. Once, we produced meat products only. Today, we are sending our crab out in sections. A section is where the crab is cooked, butchered and packed as two separate pieces per crab. This process has cut the labour intensity of the work and hence the number of jobs created.

Technology is also playing a role in the number of person-hours required to process this product. Technology is often seen as something that makes our jobs a little less stressful to our bodies, but technology is two-sided in that often it comes with job losses. When considering new technology, it has to be assessed who will benefit most from it. Will a new invention help a troubled area in the plant or will it just increase productivity, putting the workers in other areas of the plant at higher risk for injuries?

When people look at our way of life, they rarely see how this type of work can place stress on a worker's health. The human body can only stand so much strain, until eventually it will let you know how it is suffering.

The continuous use of the same muscle will eventually result in an injury. The number of workers who suffer with repetitive strain injuries would frighten anyone. Some injuries are accidental, but most injuries are the result of too much work in a very short time doing the same job day in and day out.

When we talk about injuries, we only touch the surface of the health problems we as crab plant workers face. For many years, the workers have experienced many symptoms, some associated with the flu. Today, we recognize this illness as work-related. It is known as Snow Crab Occupational Asthma (SCOA). The symptoms are many, and some are hard to associate with the workplace. Research has come a long way in recognizing what causes these symptoms and how to diagnose this problem as work-related. To date, only a handful of workers have been diagnosed with SCOA, but this does not mean that the problem is not widespread.

SCOA is affecting many of our workforce, and the company and workers alike are striving to improve the quality of the air we breathe when we are at work. A majority of the workers at Beothic, when filling out a survey on symptoms of SCOA, said they had experienced one or more of the symptoms on the survey. That gives us some idea of how serious this problem is. We now have to educate our rural doctors, our plant owners, and the workers alike in how to diagnose this illness, find out how to improve the quality of air in our plants, and let the workers know that they are not alone and that there are things they can do to protect themselves from this illness. The research and conclusions done in this area will benefit both the workers and the company.

Wearing a mask of any kind with a filter is a help to the worker who experiences chest congestion and coughing. Research has shown that the main things to look for that increase the risk to the worker are cooking steam, water vapour, and crab dust that accumulates around the saws.

Recognizing that this is a work-related illness indicates that the worker with this disease should be compensated for time off work, medical costs and disability by Workers Compensation.

However, this qualifying for Workers Compensation is a very long and tiresome process that is often expensive for the worker. Not only is the worker unable to work but, under the present system, she must travel to urban areas to be diagnosed and then, if diagnosed with SCOA, she will be reimbursed for costs by Workers Compensation. The reality is that people are coping with the illness and making do the best way they can until they can no longer work in the plant.

Beothic Fish is second to none in the concern they express for the health of their workforce. We all need guidance on how to improve the quality of the air we are breathing in our plants. Together with research, follow-up and interest by all employers and employees, we can minimize the effect processing crab has on the health of the work force.