

Introduction to Occupational First Aid

The Purpose of Occupational First Aid Attendants in the Workplace

Occupational First Aid Attendants (OFA attendants) perform a unique service in the workplace. They alleviate suffering and, on occasion, save lives through their skills at an accident scene. In addition, their effective injury management can often shorten the healing time of the injury, allowing the worker to resume normal activities sooner.

OFA attendants in the workplace must be well trained in all aspects of emergency care, from minor injury management to the most serious trauma care involving airway, breathing, and circulatory emergencies. Consequently, OFA attendants are required to take on more responsibility than many public first aid courses prepare students for. Frequently, the OFA attendant must decide when to refer the injured worker to medical attention. Many minor injuries can be properly assessed and treated by the well-trained OFA attendant without referral to a physician. In isolated work locations, because of weather conditions or transportation restrictions, the OFA attendant may be required to provide care to the injured for many hours or even overnight. This puts an added burden on the OFA attendant and emphasizes the need for a well-rounded workplace first aid course.

The OFA attendant should never be regarded as a substitute for a physician, and both the employer and employees should be made aware of his or her limitations. If the OFA attendant has to assume additional responsibilities because of a lack of access to medical facilities, this should be recognized as an undesirable situation.

Where an active workplace joint occupational health and safety committee is in place, work processes are assessed, and safe practices are set up and complied with, the number of accidents will be reduced. Where this is not the case, the number and type of injuries will depend on the inherent hazards of the work.

The OFA attendant should be a part of the workplace health and safety team. It is through this teamwork that injured workers, the employer, and all members of the health and safety team are best served. The health and safety team should hold regularly scheduled meetings to deal with issues around communications, treatments rendered, and reviewing new procedures in emergency care, and changes to local legislation affecting workplace first aid and emergency response requirements.

First Aid Legislation and the Roles and Responsibilities of the OFA Attendant

Occupational health and safety legislation in most jurisdictions makes reference to treatment of workers injured in workplace accidents and makes it mandatory for the employer to provide trained first aid attendants and first aid supplies appropriate for the circumstances of the workplace. In B.C. the requirements for the provision of first aid are outlined in the Occupational Health and Safety Regulation, Part 3, sections 3.14 to 3.21, including Schedule 3-A.

The OFA attendant is in complete charge of all first aid management of injured workers. The OFA attendant's decisions about first aid and the need for medical attention must not be overruled by supervisory personnel.

When the OFA attendant believes that a worker should be transported to a hospital, unless the worker objects, he or she must be transported to the nearest hospital or diagnostic and treatment centre. If the OFA attendant thinks it necessary to accompany the injured worker during transportation — e.g., the patient requires a stretcher for transport, requires ongoing care, or the attendant is concerned about the stability of the worker's condition — he or she should do so. The patient is the responsibility of the OFA attendant until becoming the responsibility of qualified pre-hospital emergency medical personnel or hospital staff. The Regulation gives the OFA attendant responsibility and authority, which should not be abused.

The OFA attendant must not be assigned or accept workplace duties that will not allow immediate response in the event of an emergency. The OFA attendant should also be able to respond in a clean and sanitary condition or have immediate access to a facility for cleanup.

In B.C. the *Workers' Compensation Act* provides mutual protection arising from a historic compromise in which workers relinquished their right to sue their employer and the employers agreed to fund a no-fault insurance system. As a result, a worker who is accidentally injured by another worker is barred from suing that other worker or employer for those injuries where both were engaged in the course and scope of employment at the time of the injury. In return for not being able to sue, the historic compromise ensures the injured worker will receive compensation. This means that an OFA attendant who provides first aid services to a worker as part of his or her employment duties will be protected from liability for inadvertent injury caused by some negligent act or omission. However, this does not preclude the OFA attendant from an investigation and the cancelling or suspension of his or her Occupational First Aid certificate if found to have breached a term or condition of the certificate or otherwise contravened the Act or Regulation.

Consent

While a designated OFA attendant has the responsibility and the authority to provide first aid in the workplace, all workers have the right to refuse treatment. As a result, it is important to receive consent from every conscious, mentally competent adult before you provide treatment. There are two types of consent: actual consent and implied consent. Actual consent refers to a patient making an informed decision. This may be provided as verbal consent, or when the patient sits down in the first aid room and presents an injury to the OFA attendant. Implied consent refers to a situation where a patient is unable to respond and the law assumes that the patient would give consent in an emergency situation if able.

First Aid Equipment in the Workplace

All workplaces must be equipped with materials required for first aid treatment in the event of an injury. This requirement is regulated for all workplaces and may also apply to vehicles used to transport workers. Workplace first aid equipment requirements can be found in Schedule 3-A of the Occupational Health and Safety Regulation.

First aid kits must be readily available for the attendant to take to the scene of the accident in the event that an injured worker cannot be moved. The kits must be the type that will keep the items clean and dry. The contents of these kits and other first aid equipment should match the attendant's training.

Some workplaces may require a first aid room or dressing station. The first aid room or dressing station should be as near as practicable to the workforce and allow easy access for moving a worker on a stretcher. The first aid room should be well lit, ventilated, and heated. It should contain a sink with plumbed hot and cold water. For ease of cleaning, it should have a non-porous floor.

The door to the first aid room must be clearly marked.

Qualities of the OFA Attendant

It is important that OFA attendants perform their duties to the best of their ability. It is equally important that they recognize their own limitations and scope of training.

A pleasant personality and a calm, cool attitude under stress are important for good patient care. A gentle but authoritative approach is desirable. This can help allay the patient's anxiety, which will expedite assessment and treatment.

The OFA attendant must be interested both in first aid and in people and their problems. Certain individuals are quite capable of dealing with an emergency or with a serious injury. Others are not temperamentally able to cope with an emergency or the sight of an injury and are therefore unsuited to work as an OFA attendant.