



Announcer

It's time for the *IHSA Safety Podcast*.

Enzo Garritano:

We're here with Ron Kelusky, Chief Prevention Officer at the Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development, and we're chatting a little bit about where Ontario is going with health and safety. You've released your new strategy, congratulations on that as well. It's a five-year strategy and certainly does look at a number of different elements. Maybe an opportunity to talk about a few of those highlights, Ron, and how that is, again, going to engage the different sectors to make sure that they continue to move along in a direction that helps the prevention initiative, both on the health and safety, whether it's workplace violence and harassment, or even the mental health issues.

Ron Kelusky:

Well, a lot of the strategy is all about connecting the dots, and it's all about recognizing that this is a work in progress that you cannot complete at all in five years, that we have to work towards stuff and there's some foundational stuff. And as you alluded, we have three critical factors. We have occupational disease, we have traumatic injury, and we have mental health, and they're all interrelated. We know that with respect to mental health, that 60 per cent of physical injuries have a mental health component. We know that anxiety, depression can lead to substance abuse, that can lead to injuries and fatalities. We know that there's some overarching principles that we need to take into consideration when we're moving forward with the strategy.

The new strategy that we're looking at, one is looking at evidence and looking at outcomes, trying to work towards this predictable model that if we intervene, that we know what the outcome is going to be. Whether that's a training program, whether that's a sustained communication blitz on how to avoid things, we know that we would work toward that. The second part is the methodology of how we learn and how we get people to actually absorb what we're trying to tell them.

And then of course, the third one is how do we incentivize people to be better? We know through programs like COR® that not only is it an incentive to be able to bid on jobs and to work with buyers of construction where they too can influence their supply chain, but we also know that if we can incentivize in the work that you've done, and we've done collectively with the WSIB [Workplace Safety and Insurance Board] to help people aspire to COR® through incentives, and then once they achieve it, what is the recognition value of that? If we can get more people engaged in that, big companies influencing their supply chain, buyers influencing their supply chain, we get more support for this health and safety model.

And then the last one, of course is to look at how we work with our small business and small business associations to get to those hard to reach, hard to serve areas. What we want to get out of the strategy prevention works is in fact that, is to get the message out that prevention does work and there is an economic benefit as well as a benefit to helping our workers get home safe and reduce injuries.

Enzo Garritano:

Right. And we've seen through the pandemic, the necessity for different ways of doing things and delivering health and safety training is one of them. The move to virtual, instructor-led, and the move to more acceptance of eLearning, and the move to distant consulting and that kind of thing. I know your strategy also points to, again, improving that communication, improving that opportunity for small businesses in particular to get on board. I think as a system, we're certainly engaged in moving in that direction as well as others. And we know that there's, again, influence from your office in moving everyone down that road so that's a great opportunity.

Ron Kelusky:

Yeah, I think that we want to be careful not to commoditize health and safety to the point where it's a race to the bottom and quality.

Enzo Garritano:

Absolutely. Right.

Ron Kelusky:

And I think the move that has been done to the virtual, when I say the virtual classroom, has really ensured that we were able to substantially reduce the cost on both sides of the equation. To the employer and to the provider by reducing things like transportation costs, reducing things like facility costs, and actually broadening the availability of programming to areas outside the urban centre, so it has created a great opportunity.

Enzo Garritano:

Where appropriate though. I think the key element there is where appropriate. We do a lot of high-risk training, and it's certainly, we're going to maintain that in-person contact for high-risk training where-

Ron Kelusky:

Oh yeah, we would never, yeah, I was only talking about more of the theoretical side of things to do rather than the practical. Certainly the practical side we've maintained, and we've heard loud and clear through the five-year review of *Working at Heights* training is that let's not water down a good program, especially a high-risk program. Yeah, we can tweak it here and there, but when it comes to actually feeling whether the harness is on right or not, you cannot do that through a screen. That has to be clear and present.

Enzo Garritano:

Now when you talk, if you can, just a little bit of commentary around mental health and workplace violence and harassment, occupational disease as well. Well, those are two elements that you've also included in your strategy. The importance really is the emergence of those topics over the last couple of years is certainly something that I think all of us can see. What are your thoughts on the direction in regards to mental health and workplace violence and harassment and as well as occupational disease?

Ron Kelusky:

Well, it's interesting, in some ways, the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* should be the Physical Occupational Health and Safety Act. I mean, it doesn't explicitly say mental health within the *Occupational Health and Safety Act*, although violence and harassment is there, and we debated about this. If in this strategy, if we did not mention mental health, we would be criticized quite soundly because it is an issue. One in five people in Canada suffer from mental health challenges and they bring that into the workplace, and for that reason, I think it has to be top of mind for employers to ensure that they know what to do to manage mental health, both from an occupational stress point of view and from someone coming into the workplace that have mental health concerns.

The goal here is to start the conversation, and construction has started the conversation. I've worked for almost 40 years with PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder], and it started with a conversation and you can't expect it to just happen. It's an iterative process that you bring people along. Construction has started those conversations, which is really good. We also recognize that construction is a really challenging job from a physical challenge, from an injury. People work hurt, that creates anxiety, that creates dependencies, that creates a whole series of things. We want to start the conversation and keep it moving. We see that there's leadership in the system like IHSA's collaboration with the-

Enzo Garritano:

With RESCON [Residential Construction Council of Ontario] and other.

Ron Kelusky:

The sister, with RESCON and Workplace Safety and Prevention Services, WSPS, that collaboration was really important. And we also see in some of those high-risk areas the need to start looking at occupational disease. Particularly construction, when the study came out of Cancer Care Ontario on the burden of cancer on businesses, there were four cancers that were identified. Well, you just described the construction industry, right? That's diesel particulate and inhalation, skin, solar, those type of things. It's a fairly substantial cost to the system. We're working with the WSIB on establishing a more structured system for not only monitoring occupational diseases, but also working diligently to bring the curve down. We got to start now from a prevention point of view to deal with issues emerging 25 years from now.

Enzo Garritano:

Right, and it's been an effort, I mean, over the years, and some of those nagging ones are still things that are we can deal with today, and that's noise. Noise is always such a significant issue within all the sectors that we serve. And certainly, the pandemic has also shown us other things that aren't clearly on the radar screen, whether it's biological or other hazards, and again, opens us up to that consideration. I think as a system, I think we've done a good job in saying, "Hey, we need to look at not only the ones that we can see, the issues that can see from the chemicals that we work with, but the ones that we can't see." And that just highlights some of those lagging issues that you've just mentioned.

Ron Kelusky:

Well, the hierarchy of controls is a really good example. I mean, we were dealing with silica and trying to get people to wear masks, and that was a challenge even outside of COVID. One of the things that came out of COVID was that we did some pretty extensive behavioral insights studies into why they didn't wear masks or why there were challenges associated with adapting to the rules. I think that information, when it's made public, is going to be very helpful to help us structure our programs to be able to see, well, why doesn't somebody wear hearing protection? Or why wouldn't a person cutting concrete wear a mask? Is it that they think that cutting stone is natural and natural things don't hurt you? It's like burning wood versus—so there's all kinds of canary in the coal mine stuff that's come out of COVID that will help us immensely.

Enzo Garritano:

So if you were to look at, again, we're with Ron Kelusky, our Chief Prevention Officer, who's again, retiring the end of September. And some final thoughts maybe in regards to if you're to sum up your three and a half years and say, "Gee, these are the top one or three accomplishments," during your tenure of your office of this Ministry of Labour, Training and Skills Development, I'll put you under the gun on this one. What would you say are your top one to three accomplishments?

Ron Kelusky:

I think the first one is getting people to recognize that health and safety is a system, and it's still, I think last count, over 850 people that are in the business of providing health and safety. It was getting people to realize that the ministry alone can't do it all. Unless we have policy and operations and prevention working with WSIB, the system partners in the private sector, if we don't picture ourselves in that environment, we won't be successful. We will either be competing against people, or we won't have the critical mass to move things forward. One of the first things that we did probably within a week of meeting with the new government was trying to figure out how to describe to them what the system was.

Enzo Garritano:

Right.

Ron Kelusky:

We built a place mat that had prevention councils, section 21s, health and safety associations, the Training Workers Health and Safety Program, OHCOW [Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers], policy, WSIB, private sector training providers. We put it all on a piece of paper that said, "Look, this is a complex system. We haven't really got influence over everybody. We've only got influence over some," but we were able to put that on paper. And over the last three years, we've been working more integrated as a system to not have a meeting with only one person without all the other necessary people in a room, whether it's WSIB, whether it's the policy people, whether it's operations. So that's one of the successes.

The other one I think was starting the conversation about improving our ability to capture information, to be able to start moving towards more of an outcome, epidemiological approach to health and safety, where we understand why things happen, and we're able to pinpoint and target what we do whether

through risk assessments, the root cause analysis, the success that we've had in things like the trucking, the mining, the residential construction and roofing, and focusing on not only the top 10 things that are occurring, but what are the top four things that might be causing 80 per cent of the problem versus a scatter gun approach in how we do things. So that's been a good outcome.

I think having a conversation about health and safety to raise the profile of it. So the collaborative approach, bringing together people that maybe we're interested in having somebody speak to them about health and safety, whether it's the chief prevention officer or whoever, but it's really raising that profile, and in fact, getting them to think of it as top of mind and a subject worth listening to and really make them want to miss it before they're gone.

Enzo Garritano:

There you go.

Ron Kelusky:

We're gone.

Enzo Garritano:

That's a great intro into your work. Again, I just want to reiterate the fact that you've been an advocate of that, and we want to thank you for that as you move on into retirement and maybe some parting words as this chief prevention officer who's retiring up to three and a half years, to not only our industries in the construction, transportation, and utility sectors, but overall Ontario population in general, what maybe is your departing message in regards to health and safety that you want to leave us with?

Ron Kelusky:

I'll say the advice that I would give to my replacement would be we've built a foundation, and in order to be successful, don't try to build the house in a short period of time because we want to have strong footings on what we want to build on. We want to create sustainability in the system, and sustainability is, okay, we want to build a secure foundation, basement, floor, walls, beams, second floor. Let's not try to put the roof on the basement. We know that we want, it's a longer term, it's got to be sustainable. Having noise prevention, weak needs to be noise prevention, 365 days a year. We need to be able to bring things top of mind. In 1949, a doctor looked at 600 lung cancer cases, and two things happened the day after. One is they draw the correlation between smoking and lung cancer, and the second thing that happened is that researcher quit smoking.

Enzo Garritano:

There you go.

Ron Kelusky:

But it's been a 70-year battle to be able to get smoking from 80 per cent of the population down to 16 per cent of the population, and if we don't continue to sustain that effort, it will creep upwards. So this

becomes a sustainable effort. No holds barred, stay the course, keep doing it, work and build that solid foundation and move forward. So those would be, I think we got a lot of talent. We got a lot of expertise. I think the only other part is what we need to do is we need to continue to pursue the professionalization of health and safety in the province, that we make sure that the person giving advice is a credible person. You go to your doctor because your doctor has a credential that is solid and strong. Credentialing our business, whether it's through COR®, whether it's through a recognized standard, and ensuring that our people that are providing health and safety advice are clearly qualified and capable of doing that.

Enzo Garritano:

Excellent, excellent points there, Ron. And again, thanks for your contributions towards all that, because it always starts from the leadership, and this province I think has done and has demonstrated that leadership in regards to your tenure and through the tenure through COVID and as we move forward with the new strategy. Again, thanks for your part in moving us forward as a province and in supporting the health and safety outcomes of workers and workplaces. Successful workplaces should equate to successful outcomes in regards to health and safety. And again, thanks for your efforts in this and we wish you all the best in retirement. And again, appreciate your time here with us today and through this series of conversations around your tenure as the Chief Prevention Officer, and we hope that you look forward to a healthy and long and safe retirement. So enjoy that, and again, appreciate your insights.

Announcer

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