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## Defining Occupational Illnesses and Injuries

J. KEVIN GRAYSON, Capt, USAF, BSC

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AF Occupational and Environmental Health Laboratory (AFSC)  
Human Systems Division  
Brooks Air Force Base, Texas 78235-5501

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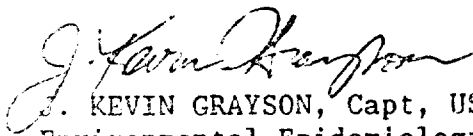
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J. KEVIN GRAYSON, Capt, USAF, BSC  
Environmental Epidemiologist

  
MARK H. STOKES, Colonel, USAF, BSC  
Chief, Health Surveillance Division

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

A. Purpose: This technical report will discuss the definitions of occupational illnesses and injuries as established by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). A systematic method for classifying an occupational event as either an illness or an injury will be presented.

B. Background: The Air Force is required to collect occupational injury and illness data, to analyze collected data, and to establish preventive programs based upon any identified unsafe or unhealthy working conditions. Specific requirements exist for reporting every occupational death, every occupational illness, and some occupational injuries.

## **II. DEFINITIONS**

A. In general, determining whether an illness or injury has occurred depends upon the nature of the incident or exposure which caused the case, not the resulting condition in the employee. Injuries are caused by instantaneous events. If you can determine the specific date and time that an event occurred, then a case is most likely an injury. Basically anything else is considered an illness. In cases that are recognized following complications or recurrences, the classification should be determined by the inciting event. For example, a security policeman bitten by a dog would be considered an occupational injury. Later, after he develops a wound infection, he would still be considered an injury, since infection resulted from a single instantaneous event.

### **B. Injuries:**

1. Occupational injuries arise from an instantaneous work-related event. Adjectives often associated with such events are "sudden", "explosive", "abrupt", "unexpected", and "quick". Occupational injury reporting is only required in the following instances.

a. The case requires medical treatment beyond normal first aid.  
Such cases may:

- (1) Require treatment by trained medical personnel.
- (2) Impair normal bodily function.
- (3) Result in nonsuperficial damage.
- (4) Involve complications which require continued medical treatment.

b. The employee loses consciousness, regardless of the circumstances.

c. The employee is either physically or mentally unable to perform all or any part of his or her normal duties.

d. The employee experiences a restriction of motion which limits his or her ability to perform normal job duties.

e. The employee is transferred to another job because he or she is unable to perform normal duties.

2. OSHA also requires reporting of lost workday cases, which are defined as injuries that cause loss of time from work beyond the day in which it occurred. AFR 127-4 requires that a competent medical authority determine if a day should be lost. Lost duty days include annual leave, sick leave, leave without pay, compensatory time, and extra time off, for civilians, and days on quarters, in hospital, and convalescent leave for military personnel.

### C. Illnesses:

1. OSHA defines an occupational illness as any abnormal condition or disorder, other than an occupational injury, caused by exposure to environmental factors related to employment. Causes can be chemical, physical, biological, or psychological. The exposure may occur via inhalation, absorption, ingestion, or through direct contact. The resulting condition can be either acute or chronic.

2. Abnormal occupational physical examination findings are a frequent problem, but they aren't necessarily reportable. Abnormal laboratory test results should only be reported if they exceed a specific OSHA standard. Standards exist for lead and benzene. Other abnormal findings from an occupational physical are reportable as illnesses. Such findings include abnormal chest x-rays, neurological examinations, etc.

3. Environmental Health Services personnel frequently have questions regarding the following illnesses.

a. Hearing loss. Noise induced hearing loss is a reportable occupational illness. OSHA has mandated that any standard threshold shift be reported. Standard threshold shifts occur when there is an average loss of ten or more dB over two, three, and four kilohertz.

b. Heart attacks. Heart attacks and other cardiovascular events are reported as occupational illnesses, if it can be demonstrated that they are work related. Heart attacks occurring outside the workplace may be considered occupational illnesses, provided that suitable exposures in the workplace have been demonstrated.

c. Emotional disorders. Emotional disorders can be classified as occupational illnesses, provided work relatedness is established.

d. Heat stress cases. Heat stress cases are reportable as occupational illnesses. The key is that the inciting cause is not instantaneous.



e. Back disorders. Back disorders and related problems are classified by OSHA as occupational injuries. Their reasoning is that back injuries almost always result from some precipitating event, whether that event can be identified or not. Although some cases may seem to be illnesses, OSHA prefers to classify them as injuries in order to keep the recordkeeping simple.

f. Dermatitis. The key to determining if a dermatitis is an illness depends on the exposure. If contact with the chemical was instantaneous, such as a splash, then an injury occurred. Otherwise, classify the case as an illness.

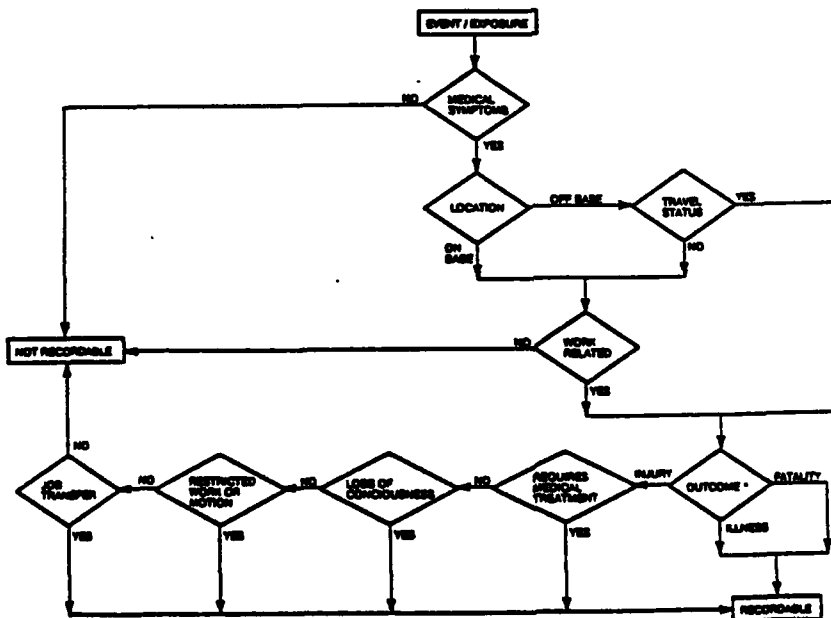
### III. PROCEDURES

A. The basic format for reporting occupational illnesses and injuries is as follows.

1. Determine if a case occurred. Did the patient experience any symptoms?
2. Determine the location in which the case occurred. Was it on base or off base?
3. Determine that the case was work related.
4. Determine if the case was a fatality, an injury, or an illness. Fatalities and illnesses are automatically reportable. If it was an injury, decide if it is a reportable case.

B. The figure below is a flow chart describing these procedures.

Occupational Illness/Injury Determination Flowchart.



\* Injury = instantaneous event

C. Determining if a case occurred should be a straight forward matter. Typical sources of case reports are worker's compensation claims filed by civilian employees, admission logs, provider referrals, abnormal physical exam findings, abnormal laboratory studies, etc. The key to determining whether a case occurred is if the patient experienced any symptoms. If there were no symptoms, the case is not reportable. Do not consider such extraneous information as worker accountability or whether the incident was preventable. Also, medical verification is not always required for a case to be reported, if the workers claim is well supported by other evidence. However, if the cause of an injury or illness is in doubt, and cannot be verified, then the event should not be reported. Verification of injury and illness claims by civilian workers is particularly important when they are diagnosed by private physicians. In these cases, the medical records of the patient should be reviewed by a flight surgeon or occupational medicine consultant, who determines if a valid injury or illness has occurred.

D. All work related injuries and illnesses are potentially reportable, regardless of whether or not an employee was performing his primary duties. Personnel who are on TDY status are also covered, including those who are enroute to and from their temporary duty station. Personnel on TDY status are considered to be on work status all the time they spend engaged in official business. Do not record a TDY event if it occurs during normal living activities such as eating, sleeping, or recreation.

E. Reporting exposure to toxic substances is not required by OSHA. These cases should only be reported if they result in an injury or illness.

F. There is no statute of limitations on reporting occupational illnesses and injuries. So long as an individual was actively employed when the injury or accident occurred, their case is reportable. However, practically speaking, there may be a limit based upon the retention period for employee records. Cases should be recorded in the year in which they are discovered.

G. Preventive actions are not reportable. Moving a worker to a new assignment to avoid an exposure is not reportable, provided no illness or injury has occurred. By the same token, checkups following an exposure are not reportable. Vaccinations, even in the face of an outbreak, are not reportable in that they are preventive actions.

H. Pre-existing or recurring conditions often cause confusion. These should not influence reportability, provided that a new exposure or incident has occurred. Injuries are clearer in this respect, since they can usually be traced to a single episode. Illnesses are less obvious, but again, the key is whether a new exposure has occurred or not.

I. Since the onset of an occupational illness in particular may be insidious, establishing work relatedness is important. The following factors should be considered when reviewing a potential occupational illness case.

1. Has the presence of an illness clearly been established?
2. Could the illness be caused by suspected agents or conditions in the workplace?

3. Are the suspected agents or conditions present (or have they been present) in the workplace?

4. Was the ill employee exposed?

5. Were exposures sufficient to result in an illness?

6. Could the illness have resulted from nonoccupational exposure?

J. If an injury or illness occurs on base, then work relatedness can be assumed. However, to be recordable, the illness or injury must be directly work related. The employee's status must be that of a worker, not a member of the general public. For example, an employee made ill by chemical fumes while filling his POV with gas would not be considered an occupational illness.

K. Off base events are reportable provided they are work related.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

A. The key to deciding whether an occupational event is reportable rests on the answers to the following questions.

1. Did the patient experience symptoms?

2. Did the event occur while the patient was on travel status?

3. Was the patient involved in work related activity?

4. Did a fatality or illness occur?

B. Differentiating injuries from illnesses depends upon the nature of the events which caused the case. The effect of the event upon the patient is not a factor in the determination.

C. Injuries are caused by instantaneous events. Illnesses are any cases not classified as an injury.

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