



# Occupational Health and Safety Risk in Public Hospitals

Victorian Auditor-General's Report  
Tabled 28 November 2013

## Background

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Occupational health and safety (OHS) covers employee health, safety and welfare in the workplace.

OHS is particularly important in public hospitals because:

- of the major hazards that exist
- patient care can also be affected if a staff member is injured.

## Background – *continued*

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OHS is also costly. The WorkCover premium paid by Victorian public hospitals is substantial, with over \$80 million paid in 2012–13 alone.

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OHS affects many workers. Hospitals are the largest employer group in the public sector.

## Audit objective and scope

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To examine the effectiveness of the management of OHS risk in public hospitals.

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The audit examined the role of health services—as employers, the Department of Health—as manager of the health system, and WorkSafe—as the regulator.

Four health services were also audited:

- two large metropolitan services
- one large regional service
- one small rural hospital.

## Audit method

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The following data collection methods were used:

- review of documentation
- structured interviews with managers and staff
- survey of OHS directors in 15 of the largest health services
- safety climate survey offered to all employees in the four audited hospitals.

## Conclusion

Public hospital staff are put at unnecessary risk while at work. This is because:

- management is not systematic or comprehensive
- the department as the health system manager does not monitor sector-wide OHS risks or emerging trends in public hospitals
- WorkSafe as the OHS regulator does not know if its project activity reduces OHS risk.

## Findings at hospital worksites

- Insufficient priority and accountability for OHS in public hospitals.
- Information on OHS incidents and risks is incomplete.
- Hospital management is not fully informed of OHS risk.

## Findings at hospital worksites – *continued*

- The incident reporting system used by public hospitals is not fit-for-purpose.
- Safety inspections by hospital staff varied widely, despite worksites sharing common OHS risks.
- There is little analysis of the factors causing OHS incidents.
- Existing information on OHS risk is not routinely integrated or prioritised.

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## Sector-wide findings

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Neither the department nor WorkSafe has a comprehensive understanding of sector-wide OHS risk because they don't currently monitor OHS incidents and emerging trends.

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WorkSafe does not know whether its projects have been effective in reducing OHS risk in public hospitals. This is because:

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- its selection of hospital worksites for projects was not based on clear criteria or systematic
- project objectives were not clear
- performance was not measured regularly against stated indicators.

## Impact during the audit

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- WorkSafe has acknowledged shortcomings with its current project management framework and is developing a new model to target risk across all industries.
- The department and WorkSafe have been working collaboratively in recent months.
- The Building Board Capability Advisory Committee has now incorporated OHS, and the learning from VAGO's OHS audit, into its approach to building board capability in 2014.

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# Recommendations

		Accept
1.	That public hospitals and health services give higher priority to, and ensure accountability for, the management of OHS.	✓
2.	That the Department of Health requires public hospitals and health services to annually assure it that they: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• manage OHS through a systematic approach in accordance with relevant legislation and standards.</li><li>• provide workers with the highest level of protection against risks to their health and safety that is reasonably practical in the circumstances.</li></ul>	✓
3.	That WorkSafe provides support to the boards of public hospitals and health services on OHS leadership and requirements to raise awareness of their responsibilities to comply with OHS laws so that public hospital staff receive the highest practicable level of OHS protection.	✓

## Recommendations – *continued*

		Accept
4.	That public hospitals and health services implement a systematic and integrated approach to OHS that complies with the Australian Standard on OHS management systems, AS4801, or an equivalent standard.	✓
5.	That while public hospital industry OHS risk remains significant compared to other industries, WorkSafe annually confirms to the Department of Health that public hospitals and health services: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• comply with OHS legislation</li><li>• have in place a systematic approach to the control of OHS risks and that effective risk control mechanisms exist.</li></ul>	✓
6.	That WorkSafe identifies sector-wide OHS risks in public hospitals and provides this information to the Department of Health, public hospitals and health services.	✓
7.	That the Department of Health and WorkSafe collaborate to assist public hospitals and health services to control the highest OHS risks.	✓



## Contact details

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