

SunSmart Councils

Christchurch City Council success story

Background

Christchurch City Council's sun protection practices focus largely on the protection of council staff and outdoor events. It does not yet have a generic sun protection policy, covering all areas of council activity. The sun protection measures were developed as part of the council's health and safety manual during the 1990s and have been further developed in recent years.

The council has practices pertaining to sun safety in the following ways:

1. Outdoor events – in conjunction with the Cancer Society, the council operates shade programmes for summer events and recreation facilities. This includes the use of portable shade units, free sunscreen for the public and umbrellas for council staff
2. Swimming pool – shade structures are in place at outdoor swimming pools
3. Outdoor workers – protective clothing including long-sleeved shirts are supplied, along with wide-brimmed hats, sunscreen, and appropriate sunglasses. The council also tries to rotate working schedules so staff work as little as possible during the hottest hours of the day. More recently, free annual skin checks have been introduced for workers who are exposed to the sun for a significant period of time.

Implementation

The council's previous health and safety advisor initiated Christchurch City Council's sun protection practices as part of their official health and safety manual. The original sun protection practices were based on the Department of Labour's Occupational Safety and Health Service guidance notes for the protection of workers from UVR.

The council's sun protection measures relate to its Healthy City scheme that aims to provide a safer environment for staff and public in the area.

Development of sun protection practices

In recent years, the council's current health and safety advisor began to expand measures to protect outdoor workers from the sun. This included the introduction of yearly skin checks. The checks are offered free of charge to staff who are exposed to sunlight for a significant part of their working day. They are also available to other council employees at their own cost.

To promote SunSmart behaviour in the public arena, the council has been working alongside the Cancer Society Canterbury/West Coast Division on a shade programme for outdoor events, since 2003. At present the Cancer Society

provides seven portable units of shade that can be booked for outdoor events and use at recreational facilities.

The shade programme partnership works in the following way: the Cancer Society is responsible for maintenance of shade units and sunscreen dispensers, and replacement of equipment when necessary. The council provides storage of shade units and sunscreen dispensers. It also operates a loan system for the borrowing of equipment by council teams and community groups. All bookings are made through the council's health promotion coordinator, who also organises any free SunSmart merchandise such as balloons, drink bottles or back packs.

Initial responses

The incorporation of sun protection into council policy has met with a positive response from the outset.

The recent introduction of skin checks was promoted to management as part of monitoring for staff who work outdoors. The only obstacle to the introduction of these checks was how the council would define workers who are exposed to the sun for a "significant part of their working day". It was eventually decided that an employee must be outside for a period of at least three hours on a consistent basis every week to qualify for the free skin checks.

The outdoor events shade programme has been very well received by the council, with the agreement being re-evaluated and renewed each year.

Health and safety manual specifications

All clothing provided to outdoor workers must meet specific standards as set out in the council's health and safety manual. The council provides wide-brimmed hats or legionnaire style hats, which must be worn except when a hard hat is required. Sunscreen (minimum SPF15) is provided and all sunglasses allow less than 5 percent of UVA transmission.

Policy wording

A number of Christchurch City Council's sun protection practices pertain to the council's commitment to the provision of a healthy and safe working environment for employees. The updated 2005 policy covers three primary areas of sun protection:

- 1. Education: Staff are to receive education on the dangers of UV radiation and how to minimise the risk. The information should be presented in verbal, written and audio-visual forms.*
- 2. Work Organisation: Ideally work should be organised so that minimum sun exposure occurs. That is, work in shady areas, avoid outside work, or if possible work under cover between the hours of 10.00am – 3.00pm (11.00am – 4.00pm during daylight saving).*
- 3. Personal Protection: This will be required when work cannot be organised as above to provide for minimum sun exposure.*

Promotion

The written promotion of the skin checks took numerous forms including emails to managers, team leaders and throughout the council's health and safety network. These emails were followed up with phone calls to key staff within the health and safety network, encouraging them to promote the policy. Posters about the free skin checks were displayed on notice boards and advertising was placed on the council's intranet for two weeks.

As a result of the yearly skin checks, three outdoor workers were found to have melanomas and were referred for appropriate treatment. Promotion was particularly built up around one council park ranger who had a malignant mole removed. She was featured heavily in internal publications and communication networks as a 'real life' example of how sun protection and monitoring can save lives.

The outdoor events shade programme has been promoted within Christchurch City Council internal publications such as handbooks and brochures.

Evaluation

The Christchurch City Council sun protection policy is reviewed periodically as required but minimally at three-yearly intervals.

What worked well

Within the council, people are now far more conscious of sun protection. Internal promotion had a big impact, particularly publicity around the worker who was found to have melanoma through the annual skin checks. A story such as this brings home the very real dangers of skin cancer and harmful exposure to UVR.

The skin checks have become so popular in the past few years that 300-400 council staff members now attend them (many at their own cost). Outside of the annual checks, staff were encouraged to consult a doctor immediately if they noticed changes in freckles or moles.

The outdoor events shade programme has also been very successful. There has been little if any negative feedback and only minimal damage incurred on the shade units. Since the commencement of the programme Christchurch City Council has remained the largest user of the shade equipment, along with community leisure teams.

What could have worked better

Christchurch City Council's outdoor worker policy does not currently reflect updated Cancer Society recommendations when it comes to appropriate personal sun protection. SPF30+ broad-spectrum sunscreen must be available to workers, as well as some changes to clothing requirements, for the policy to meet Cancer Society recommendations.

The promotion of the outdoor events shade programme has not been as extensive as it could be and future changes are being looked into. The Cancer Society plans to advocate to the council for SunSmart branding to be included in the promotion of outdoor summer events.

Suggestions

The following suggestions for TLAs intending to extend or develop sun protection practices came from key staff members at Christchurch City Council and a Cancer Society health promoter.

- Rather than working from scratch, find a sun protection policy template that can be adapted for your council. That way, you have a solid starting point and can learn from those who have worked on the issue before you.
- Re-evaluate the policy on an ongoing basis to reflect up-to-date recommendations when it comes to sun protection.