



Willett Centre Health Risk – Nathan Campus

UPDATE FOR STAFF WHO WERE FORCED TO ENDURE ONGOING EXPOSURE TO POOR QUALITY AIR FLOW; STRONG CHEMICAL ODOURS AND POTENTIALLY HARMFUL SUBSTANCES.

We note that unsuspecting staff received an email from Facilities Management on Friday July 4, 2008 informing them that they were going to commence treatment of the ventilation systems and that this would continue until the July 18, 2008.

No further information or instruction was given to staff to forewarn of what to do, should any adverse conditions arise. This is despite the university's obligation to do so under the *Workplace Health & Safety Act 1995* which states the following:

- a. providing and maintaining a safe and healthy work environment;
- b. providing and maintaining safe plant;
- c. ensuring the safe use, handling, storage and transport of substances;
- d. ensuring safe systems of work;
- e. providing information, instruction, training and supervision to ensure health and safety.

In response to members' concerns, the ASU urgently called for a lunch time meeting with staff on Thursday July 10, 2008 to discuss the health risk and to support and advise staff of their options.

Following this meeting, ASU Organiser, Ms Valda Graham met with HR Advisor, Dino Varriacchio to inform the University of the outcomes of that meeting and which were later reflected in a supporting letter from the ASU, dated 11 July, 2008.

This was to officially notify the university of our concerns and of our expectations in regard to resolving this matter as quickly as possible in the interests and wellbeing of staff.

The university had agreed to meet our immediate concerns such as relocating staff to other work locations and where this is not possible, to allow staff to take leave with pay. This would also apply to staff who became ill because of the ongoing fungicidal treatment.

The university also assured us that they would cease the maintenance work on the ventilation system until the weekend when there would be no staff present.

This was again confirmed in a follow up meeting with HR Associate Director, Ken Greedy in the afternoon of July 11, 2008 where we met to discuss the contents of our letter and to request a copy of the Risk Assessment carried out by the University as required by law. ASU Organiser, Valda Graham indicated that she would be on the premises first thing Monday morning July 14, 2008 to monitor the situation.

The ASU position is that if there is any odour present, staff should not return to the Willett Centre and in which case, the university agreed that the existing provisions for staff will remain in place.

The ASU raised the following with the Human Resource Management Team representatives on behalf of Administrative/Professional Staff:

- that the University provide to the ASU a copy of their *Risk Assessment & Impact Statement* on the use an application of this chemical product as well as the general risk of mould spores in the workplace.
- that the University immediately find alternative work locations for staff in the Willett Centre, whilst the treatment of the fungicide continues.
- any inability by the University to safely house staff, outside of the Willett Centre allow staff to take leave with pay until their workplace is without odour and safe to return.
- that staff who previously have taken leave through sickness arising through the use of this chemical be counted as paid leave.
- there must be an investigation into who was responsible for making the decision to use the chemical through the ventilation system and why it went ahead without the proper safeguards and consultation? (The ASU are of the opinion that no airborne substances should be used without prior notice and without an agreed method of dealing with adverse reactions in place)
- staff are concerned about the lack of communication by the University in regards to the notification and instruction on working safely, particularly when problems became apparent. Staff were unable to receive reasonable timely responses by the University and became extremely concerned and frustrated by the lack of regard for their safety.
- what training is in place for supervisors and divisional heads to ensure that when matters are raised with them by fellow staff, that they can in fact handle and not ignore the situation?
- if there is an existing problem with mould spores, why has the University not notified staff of this potential health and safety risk to date? - given the possible reaction and sensitivities by staff to which the university may be unaware. (*Mould is a hazard, as witnessed by the protective clothing worn by the mould removers in recent times within the Library*)

The ASU does not accept the Risk Assessment provided to us by the university, for the reasons as set out below:

- the risk assessment has been prepared by the contractor, not the university.
- the risk assessment only covers the work aspects for the contractor and the assessment offers no further planning beyond his involvement.
- the university still failed to communicate with staff leading up to the treatment and has offered no instruction, training or monitoring of the situation once the risk was identified as staff were forced to endure ongoing exposure to poor quality air flow; strong chemical odours and potentially harmful substances.
- it is clear that the university has not established its own risk assessment

Where to from here – the University has indicated that it will respond to all of our concerns in writing by Tuesday July 15, 2008 and we will monitor the situation closely to ensure that the wellbeing of staff is not compromised in anyway further.

The ASU will also hold another Workplace Health & Safety **LUNCH TIME** Meeting:

VENUE: Outside the Willett Centre
TIME: 12:00 pm
WHEN: Friday July 18, 2008

We are also calling for staff to participate on a Reference Committee to look at the health and safety risks and impacts on administrative staff to ensure that this type of problem does not arise again.

If you would like to know more about becoming a Health & Safety Representative for staff (*workers health centre provides training*) please contact Valda or Luna on 3252 8666.