Practicing Ergonomic Safety in an Animal Care Organization

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Problem Statement:
Assessment of workplace risks can be a challenge for an OHS department because of restricted access to animals and animal care personnel. Within all animal care facilities, there is an element of routinely reported injuries that are frequently skeletal-muscular injuries, which includes backs, legs, shoulders, and necks. Development of an Ergonomic Safety Risk Assessment within the animal organization at our institution has helped reduce injury and improved reporting of these incidents. The auditing process of each facility within the organization has helped to develop awareness of the surroundings and, in particular, greater attention to an aging population of animal care personnel. This in turn has helped in resolving worker overload to decrease injury. Assessment of equipment, critical care space, and storage areas have developed from a safety auditing committee which meets on a regular schedule. This committee has organized and developed into an observational group to identify areas associated with higher instances of injury. Equipment purchases to help the animal care group to overcome ergonomic issues are ongoing. Assessment of this equipment has become part of the safety committee to insure the reduction of injury associated with ergonomic risk. Continuation of a monitoring system from IACUC administration helps to keep focus within the group and an annual report was developed to communicate suggestions for improvement.

Description of the research:
As part of maintaining an Occupational Health and Safety Program (OHSP), it was determined that an ergonomic assessment auditing of the following areas must be routinely evaluated: Control and Prevention Strategies; Hazard Identification and Risk Assessment; Facilities; Equipment; Monitoring Personnel in Training; Animal Experimentation Involving Hazards; and Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) used in the daily animal care and maintenance of all animal facility areas. As part of the Animal Exposure Occupational Health Program (AEOHP), a yearly review of Vertebrate Animal Areas for Personnel Safety and Ergonomics was established. This now has been accepted by the IACUC. As part of this review, a report is generated to establish guidelines and auditing of progress within the animal care facilities. A safety committee was also established to conduct internal auditing and assessment of equipment, personnel, workload, and training. This allows the group to rotate personnel within the safety committee as well as review annual assessment conducted by the Occupational Health and Safety Specialist (OHSS).

Additional Information:
An aging workforce and a productive workforce go hand in hand when observing the everyday care of an animal facility. Healthy and productive personnel need to be aware of and alert to various degrees
of awareness when working with animals on a daily basis. Keeping the workforce healthy and productive is the main goal of all supervisory and management staff. Rotation of workload and taking frequent breaks when doing a strenuous or tedious procedure enables the animal care worker to be more attentive to their surroundings and operating techniques. Making supervisors aware of difficult tasks to manage work task effort differently and suggesting the purchasing of equipment for ergonomic safety has proven to be a significant step forward in establishing a more effective workforce with fewer injuries to report. Auditing and safety oversight by peer group assessments have helped to improve the overall productivity, with reassignment of tasks and anti-fatigue equipment. Assessing each individual's workload by others helps the safety and auditing group to be aware of work overload, stress and strain, and to recognize limitations within the work schedule as the ultimate goal. Training safety committee members to recognize individual job related potentials for injury and listening to their suggestions is key to helping the individuals in each group achieve a healthier, more productive workplace. The animal facilities gain from this program awareness to their surroundings, user friendly equipment, and less injury time off by care staff.