

## The New Rule: Medical Implications

*Robert Dobie, M.D.*

OSHA's new rule will dramatically increase the number of threshold shifts that must be recorded, unless they are determined not to be work-related, thus increasing demand for clinical evaluation of work-relatedness. The key question for employers and their clinical consultants will be "would this worker's hearing loss have been different if the workplace exposure had not occurred?" The answer will depend mostly on the worker's noise exposures (occupational, non-occupational, use of hearing protection), complete set of audiograms (especially audiometric shape and change over time), age, and medical history. Consultants will usually have to rely on the file review instead of a face-to-face visit; some will decline to participate. Hearing conservation program managers may now need to maintain three different baselines for each ear of each worker: one for STS, one for recordability, and one for referral.

## Determining Work-Relatedness of NIHL

*Alan Langman, M.D.*

Noise induced hearing loss (NIHL) cost industry billions of dollars in settlements to workers in the form of monetary compensation and the purchasing and maintenance of hearing aids. Not all NIHL is due to occupational causes. Frequently, it is the responsibility of the health care professional to determine whether the hearing loss is work related or not. Though guidelines exist to make the diagnosis of NIHL, there are few standards that are available to determine the work-relatedness of NIHL. The audiologist or physician must at times use one or a combination of factors to determine if NIHL is occupationally related. These factors include state statutes, worker history, audiometric findings, industry historical data as well as noise survey data. Illustrations of using these factors in determining work-related NIHL will be given.

## Evaluation of Hearing Conservation Program Effectiveness: Compliance versus Best Practices

*Mary M. Prince, Ph.D.*

The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) has conducted a study examining factors affecting hearing conservation program (HCP) effectiveness in three manufacturing plants. The study purpose was to develop methods for evaluating hearing conservation programs and to identify predictors of program effectiveness. The presentation will illustrate how focus groups, comprised of line workers and supervisors, were used to clarify and augment information gathered through more traditional program assessments (paper audits, interviews with HCP administrators) at three plants to provide a more enriched picture of hearing conservation practices. Results indicate that exclusive reliance on such practices as policy review, audiometric testing audits, and noise surveillance to evaluate the effectiveness of workplace hearing conservation programs fails to capture the impact of these programs as experienced by workers at the "shop floor" and offers little insight into the reasons and potential remedies for noted deficiencies.

**Prince** MM [2003]. Evaluation of Hearing Conservation Program Effectiveness: Compliance vs. Best Practices. Proceedings of the 28th Annual Conference, National Hearing Conservation Association Meeting, February 20-22, 2003. NHCA Spectrum 20:23.

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