

OCCUPATIONAL HAZARDS IN THE HEALTH CARE INDUSTRY

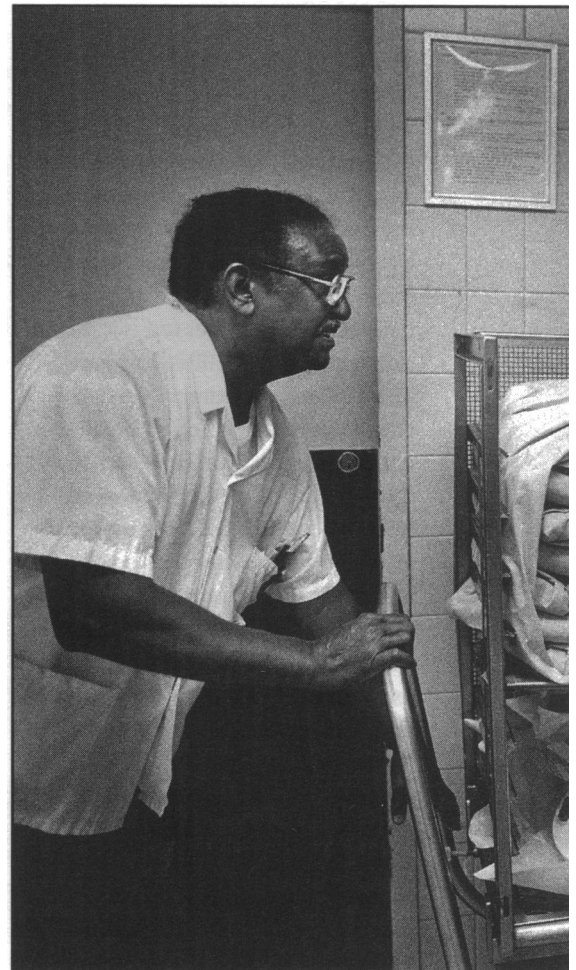
Jobs in the health care industry are becoming some of the most dangerous for the U.S. workforce. The health sector employs 10.5 million workers. In 1994, the annual injury and illness rate for the health care sector was 9.4 per 100 full-time workers. To put this rate in perspective, compare it with rates for paper mills (8.7 per 100), coal mining (10.3), and steel mills (14.0).

Health workers are exposed to infectious diseases from needle sticks and other sources; to radiation from X-ray equipment and diagnostic and therapeutic radioisotopes; to chemicals from chemotherapy drugs, waste anesthetic gases, sterilizer gases such as ethylene oxide, laser plumes, and aerosolized drugs such as ribavirin and pentamidine; to ergonomic injury, especially back injury; to violence, particularly



▲ Nurse in intensive care unit attempts to stabilize gunshot victim. Understaffing stresses critical care staff and compromises care. Washington DC, 1989.

A hospital worker prepares to sterilize surgical instruments. The sterilizer uses ethylene oxide, a toxic chemical still in wide use in hospitals today. Exposure to ethylene is associated with severe pulmonary irritation. Bronx, New York, 1982.

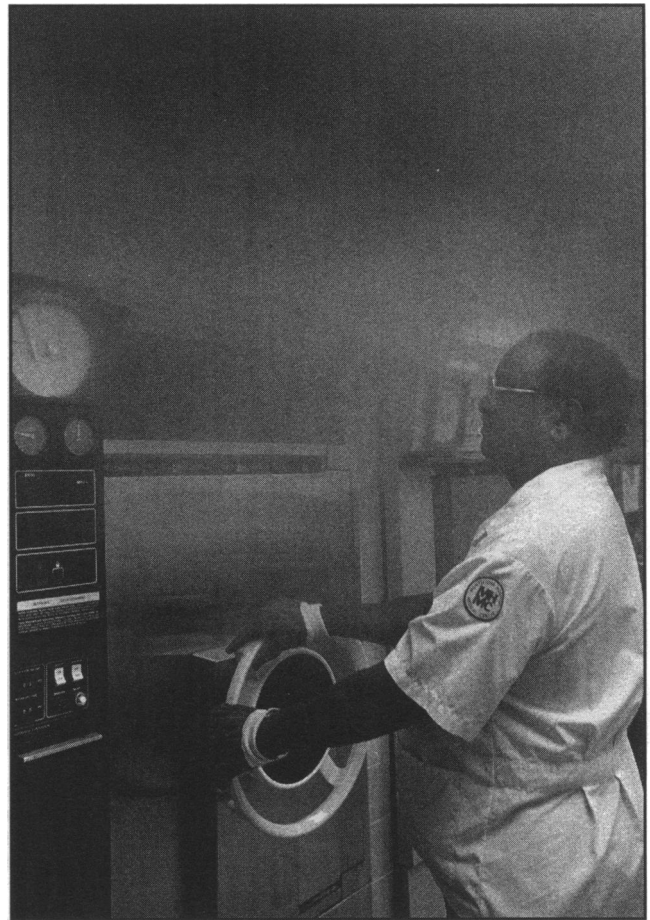
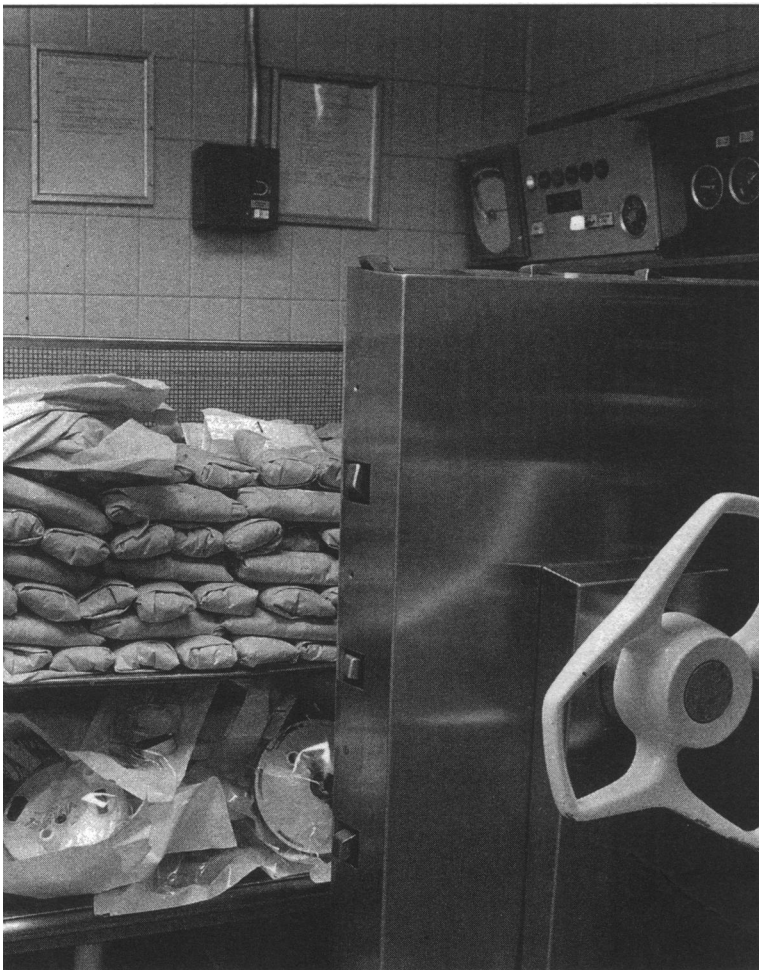


PHOTOGRAPHS BY EARL DOTTER

in psychiatric units; to shift-work hazards; and to reproductive hazards.

Despite this list of potential hazards, many of which are found principally in the health sector, there is only one Federal OSHA standard specifically for the health industry: the standard on bloodborne pathogens.

Photographer Earl Dotter has gained national recognition for his photographs of American workers. His latest work, "The Quiet Sickness: A Photographic Chronicle of Hazardous Work in America," is an account of the occupational health and safety problems of workers in textiles



▲ A hospital worker opens a sterilizer to remove surgical instruments. The employee is engulfed in steam laden with ethylene oxide vapor. Within a few seconds after this photo, he was completely obscured from view. Bronx, New York, 1982.

mills, coal mines, chemical plants, auto factories, the logging industry, and the service sector, including hospital work. The 120 black-and-white images will be on exhibit throughout New England over the next three years, sponsored by the Harvard School of Public Health. Over the course of the next year, *Public Health Reports* will run a series of Mr. Dotter's photographs, each focusing on a different industry.

A 164-page book on the exhibit consisting of 145 duotones will be published by the American Industrial Hygiene Association Press in April. Address correspondence to Earl Dotter, 1714 Luzerne Ave., Silver Spring MD 20910; tel 301-589-3061; fax 301-589-7920.



▲ Hospital laundry workers sort soiled bed linens from wards with patients being treated for contagious and infectious diseases. Wire mesh gloves lower the risk of needle sticks. Bureau of Labor Statistics show that the highest incidence of injuries in the health care industry are among custodial and housekeeping personnel. This photograph was taken on a hot summer day in a non-air-conditioned basement room; an unpleasant odor hung in the air. Bronx, New York, 1982.



▲ Needles found in soiled bed linens shipped from local hospitals to a central laundry. These "sharps" were found by laundry employees over a period of one year. Brooklyn, New York, 1997.



◀ Laundry worker stocks poorly designed hospital bed linen storage racks, forcing her to lift heavy bedding above shoulder height. The highest shelves posed particular difficulties because of the woman's diminutive stature. The clean bundles of laundry would sometimes tumble to the floor after her first attempts at shelving them. Chicago, Illinois, 1993.