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Number One

A lifetime achievement award for his years of research into occupational health went to Professor Neil Pearce just in time – he’s about to leave the country, as **ANGELA GREGORY** discovered.

Professor *Neil Pearce* is far too well-mannered to get seriously tetchy by any misplaced suggestion that dry statistical analysis might seem slightly at odds with the human face of health issues.

Safeguard was interviewing Pearce at Massey University’s *Centre for Public Health Research* in Wellington to mark his Air New Zealand lifetime achievement award announced at this year’s NZ Workplace Health and Safety Awards.

Pearce pounces on a semi-formed question about the study of data in relation to the study of people to say he has heard the writer of this article recently uttered “number-crunchers” in a telephone interview with one of his epidemiologist colleagues. “He should have

responded that you people are just typists,” he says with a hint of a smirk.

It is hard to tell if he is actually offended, but Pearce wastes no time in putting me straight. “We deal with health problems first ... and use the numbers to address them.” To make sure the typist understands, he reiterates: “We don’t start with the numbers, we start with the idea, and use the numbers to test it.”

In Pearce’s view the main job of the epidemiologist is to discover the major health risk factors of populations. “And you need a large number of numbers to work out what is going on.”

Sorted! Although later the, er, word-counter in him emerges as Pearce suggests this write-up needs only be 10 sentences long.



One senses this is mostly a case of modesty prevailing – although it was also a Friday afternoon, his last end-of-week work drinks at CPHR, and a bottle of bubbly with his name on it was chilling in the fridge.

After 10 years as director of the centre, Pearce has a new job in Britain where he has a general epidemiology role with the *London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine*. He's not sure exactly what he will be doing, besides supporting the Chelsea football club (he had his welcome drinks re-scheduled so he wouldn't miss a game), but will basically be looking at "methods to study methods".

His departure from New Zealand makes the lifetime achievement award even more fitting. The award aims to recognise people who have devoted a significant portion of their working life to advancing the cause of health and safety in this country.

The judges noted that Pearce had been active in occupational health research for more than 20 years, specialising in occupational cancers and occupational respiratory disease. He was director of the *Asthma Research Group* from 1996 to 2000 and also headed the *National Occupational Health and Safety Advisory Committee* for five years from 2004.

Under his leadership, the risks of respiratory disease and causal exposures in welders, farmers, mussel openers, hairdressers, along with asbestos workers, sawmill and plywood mill workers were identified. His research also identified elevated risks of cancer in various occupational groups, including producers and sprayers of phenoxy herbicides, meat workers, pulp and paper workers, farmers and timber workers exposed to PCP.

Pearce personally rates the series of studies on occupational cancers and asthma as career highlights, and values the contribution of Nohsac. "It had some impact ... which is reasonably big given the difficulties of influencing policy at all here."

Despite its best efforts however, Pearce says the status of occupational health and the lack of priority it is given is a "total disaster". "There have been a whole series of mistakes made mostly by previous governments and exacerbated by the current government."

The first mistake, he says, was the decision in 1992 to move occupational health out of the *Ministry of Health* into the DoL as part of OSH. The idea, which Pearce admits he "went

along with", was promoted by the unions who thought that occupational health was not being given significant priority. While Pearce sympathised with their point of view, the results in shifting to OSH were disappointing. "It did not work because of the different mindset to working with injuries ... occupational health was always a square peg in a round hole in OSH."

Pearce says the DoL didn't really didn't want to know about occupational health. "There was a suspicion of experts who tended to have inconvenient opinions." As people left they weren't replaced, and the resource was dissipated to other areas within the department, he says.

Its wilting profile has regenerated a little, largely due to the work of Nohsac. "At least we've put the words occupational health back on the agenda ... but it's a long way from where we were."

Pearce now thinks occupational health would be better back with the Ministry of Health, but also notes that even public health under that umbrella has diminished.

Ideally he would like to see the re-establishment of a Public Health Commission, as once existed back in the 1990s. "It did great work for several years."

In the meantime, Pearce says a fundamental solution is to restore the technical expertise in the DoL to practically assist employers to implement successful workplace interventions. "We need people with proper technical training like ergonomists, occupational medical specialists, nurses and hygienists ... people are more likely to take on board a message from an expert than a generic policy analyst."

He knows there is a thirst for this sort of advice as every couple of months employers contact CPHR as they can't find anyone to talk to at the department.

Pearce's interest in occupational health was born out of jobs he undertook after studying maths and statistics at university. He felt the need for some "time out" and worked in the Kodak factory in Porirua and then drove Wellington buses. "That taught me a lot about occupational health and how those sorts of jobs can be stressful and hard on your health."

When attempting to get a job as a hospital orderly in 1979 Pearce let slip that he had a degree in statistics and ended up working as

a biostatistician at the medical school in Wellington. "I've been a health researcher ever since ... I've done a variety of things but occupational health has been my main interest." Along the way Pearce gained a PhD in occupational epidemiology at Otago University.

The lag from research to interventions can prove frustrating, but Pearce says it has always been the case. "For example we are only getting serious about controlling smoking 60 years since its connection with lung cancer was known."

To some degree Pearce accepts that it takes time. "The path to affecting policy is a convoluted one, but ultimately it will." Needless to say he has worked in occupational health research long enough to see some changes achieved.

In the 1980s Pearce was involved in the first studies into dioxin exposure in 245T pesticide and the PCP timber treatment chemical. "These things have basically gone."

Similarly he was involved in some of the research work around asbestos and that was now mostly controlled in New Zealand. And Pearce's work on wood dust exposures, along with overseas research, has seen changes in acceptable exposure levels.

Pearce stresses that ideally research should be replicated elsewhere to be shown to be sound. And that means New Zealand researchers should conduct their own studies, even if repeating what has been done overseas.

"Nothing will happen here unless you can show it locally." Groups like the CPHR were important as the average person, whether in the DoL or managing a factory, can get flooded with information but not be sure what is valid. Who is telling the information is as important as the content, and local experts can interpret material and sort the wheat from the chaff, says Pearce.

Looking further afield Pearce, who is the *President of the International Epidemiological Association*, says many occupational health problems have become global, so need to be tackled globally. "A lot of the exposures we have studied have not gone but moved to the third world."

And as New Zealand's working environment changes, a whole range of new exposures emerge. "It's not like we've run out of things to study," he says.

Sadly however this typist's fingers are running out of energy, and also unfortunately for Pearce the article has run to more than 10 sentences. Arguably, like numbers, you sometimes need a lot of words to build a picture. Hopefully Pearce can't disprove the logic of that.

"NOTHING WILL HAPPEN HERE UNLESS YOU CAN SHOW IT LOCALLY."