

Occupational health legislation falls short

Current environmental and occupational health legislation does not provide measures to prevent **pollution** and therefore prevent cancer, according to the recently released **document** "Preventing Occupational and Environmental Cancer: A Strategy for Toronto." The recent uncertainty about the future of the crown agency, Cancer Care Ontario (CCO), the government's principal adviser on cancer prevention, calls into question the future of **occupational** and environmental cancer prevention strategies. The government has indicated that CCO **will** be reviewed by a newly appointed panel of experts,

CCO was created four years ago by the current government to co-ordinate cancer treatment in Ontario through eight regional cancer centres physically located in hospitals in Hamilton, Kingston, London, Ottawa, Sudbury, Thunder Bay, Toronto and Windsor. This agency acts as the primary adviser to the government on cancer issues and is responsible for long-term planning, prevention, screening, research, treatment and supportive care.

We can only hope the upcoming review of CCO will be more than an administrative review and time will be taken to examine current occupational and environmental cancer prevention strategies and the cancer epidemic in Ontario. In 1998, as reported in "Preventing,** 2,079 working people -died as a result of cancer-causing substances at work,

Preventing cites recent studies which suggest 90 per cent of cancer is not hereditary but caused by conditions



and exposures we encounter throughout our lives. **Preventing** includes 39 identified occupations where employees may face increased carcinogenic risk resulting from workplace exposures. These occupational risks created from specific manufacturing processes, **use** of chemicals and disposal of waste don't just remain in the workplace. They escape into the environment and affect adults at home and children at play **through** emissions **into** the air, water, and **soil**. And blue collar workers bear a disproportionate excess cancer risk due **to** exposures in the workplace. These cancers are preventable **if** the social will exists.

As **an** example, Sarnia is ranked "number one"* in Canada for releases into the air of a wide variety of toxic chemicals and is fourth in Canada for the release **of** carcinogens. This puts the workers of these plants and the residents **of** the surrounding communities at risk for cancer. In Windsor, there are high concentrations of lead compounds released into the environment from years of car manufacturing. Lead is considered one of the most hazardous compounds **-to** ecosystems and human health. And Sudbury has high concentrations of arsenic, also extremely dangerous, deposited into the environment from years of nickel **manufacturing**.

The good news is that occupational and environmental, cancer is preventa-

ble. Communities, unions and governments can continue to encourage large corporations and businesses to change their processes and materials.

The test of the current review **of** Cancer Care Ontario will be whether this agency can begin to seriously address the **challenge** of occupational and environmental cancer prevention. The review should evaluate the direction of cancer services in Ontario and, more specifically, why cancer prevention seems to be so weakly supported. The inclusion of **community** groups, unions and other organizations on the panel of experts would be an important step towards developing more effective occupational and **environmental** cancer prevention strategies.

Many people have been working extremely hard **to** bring cancer prevention to the forefront. In fact, the Canadian Labour Congress will be holding a conference, "Preventing Cancer and Occupational Disease," in Ottawa, Nov. 10 to 12, which **will** focus on cancer education, cancer prevention and the investigation of diseases. There is no excuse for more missed opportunities to develop effective primary prevention strategies, particularly when the cost is measured in so many needless deaths. We are all exposed to cancer-causing substances in the workplace and the environment — it most stop,

Mary Cook is managing director of the Occupational Health Clinics for Ontario Workers Inc.