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Risky Business

While ranging in severity, occupational hazards exist for any given profession. Major league pitchers may tear the rotator cuff in their pitching shoulder, requiring surgery and rehabilitation before returning to the game. Firefighters face risks including smoke inhalation, burns, and falls. Editors may go blind from staring at a computer screen all day.

As with these other groups, individuals working in laboratory animal research face a unique set of potential dangers, including repetitive motion disorders, scratches and bites, and exposure to zoonoses or laboratory animal allergens. Federal regulations mandate that each animal research institution have in place an occupational health and safety (OHS) program to identify risks and eliminate or minimize their occurrence. In this issue, we present three articles that touch on different aspects of animal care worker OHS and discuss specific precautions that can be taken to protect employees against a variety of potential hazards.

One result of the recent increase in the attention and funding being applied to the area of bioterrorism is the need for more facility space appropriately designed for work with high-risk bugs. In many cases, the time and money required to build new high-containment facilities are not available, so space providing standard (ABSL1/2) levels of containment must be converted to ABSL-3 space. To house research with ABSL3 pathogens (e.g., *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*, the causative agent of tuberculosis), a facility must include a number of specific design aspects relating to everything from the physical layout to the functioning of the building's HVAC system. Author Hitt (p. 30) discusses the basic considerations that will need to be addressed in any facility biosafety level upgrade project, including tips for maintaining facility function during the renovation period.

In addition to zoonoses, laboratory animal allergens are another potentially dangerous exposure risk that animal facility personnel may routinely encounter. About one-third of facility staff exhibit some allergic symptoms; of these, about 10% will develop more serious asthma. An important aspect of OHS programs is to identify individuals with LAA and limit staff exposure to the proteins that cause this condition. Author Figler (p. 25) discusses the etiology of LAA, and then goes on to describe measures that can be implemented to minimize exposure of personnel to laboratory animal allergens, including engineering controls and the proper use of personal protective equipment.

The advent of individually ventilated caging (IVC) systems for housing rodents is considered by many to be an important step toward protecting animal care personnel. In addition to increasing the interval between necessary cage changes—possibly reducing the risk of repetitive motion injuries for cage change staff—these systems also limit the amount of air exchange between the cage interior and the room at large. Thus, animal facility personnel come into contact with less airborne animal allergens and zoonotic pathogens. Despite these obvious benefits, the installation of these caging systems may necessitate changes to other facility procedures, and authors Compton *et al.* (p. 36) highlight the need to reassess the sampling and detection methods used in rodent health monitoring programs when the animals under surveillance are housed in IVCs.