

## Identifying occupational hazards – past and present

*By Barry Moreland*

Nearly three hundred years have passed since physicians first began to realize that a man's job was not only his living, but often times a direct cause of his dying. [Bernardino Ramazzini](#), considered by many to be the father of occupational medicine, visited workplaces, observed workers' activities, and discussed their illnesses with them. He studied relationships between certain disorders and postural attitudes, repetition of movements, including weight lifting, and anticipated some preventive measures. A snapshot of his findings is illustrated in the following quote:

“Various and manifold is the harvest of disease reaped by certain workers from the crafts and trades that they pursue; all the profit that they get is fatal injury to their health. That crop germinates mostly, I think from two causes. The first and most potent is the harmful character of the materials they handle, for these emit noxious vapours and very fine particles inimical to human beings and induce particular diseases; the second cause I ascribe to certain violent and irregular motions and unnatural postures of the body by reason of which the natural structure of the vital machine is so impaired that serious diseases gradually develop therefrom.”

Bernadino Ramazzini, *De Morbis Artificum Diatriba* (Diseases of Workers), 1713

It is interesting that the two causes identified by Ramazini years ago are still valid causes of injury and illness today. What has significantly changed are the ways we approach and manage exposure to hazardous tasks and dangerous work environments. Job Hazard Assessments, Pre-Task Plans, Best Known Methods and Construction Incident Prevention Plans are all tools, used on our construction sites today, that parallel the approach taken by Ramazinni to identify root causes for worker injuries or illnesses and predict potential workplace hazards.

Once identified, steps are then taken to eliminate or control these hazards, which can include the use of personal protective equipment. While PPE may not always be the best solution, it is often the most practical for the constantly changing construction industry. Today, employees are exposed to a much wider variety of occupational hazards than ever before. Vendors are prepared to provide new products and control methods to handle these exposures. One must not lose sight that eliminating hazards through engineering and administrative controls is the best form of worker protection available.

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