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Denise Koh

# Safety lessons from the pandemic

By Jessie Weir, WORKSAFELY® Education Programs Coordinator

**C** OVID-19 is still a public health and workplace concern. From sanitization to daily screening, the construction industry is continuing to do its part to control the spread of the virus and protect workers.

As the heavy construction industry was deemed essential, operations were able to continue business as usual through government lockdowns. This forced the industry to implement additional safety protocols including social distancing, cleaning, sanitizing and PPE. Additionally, Manitoba's heavy construction industry implemented new policies and procedures to prevent the spread of the virus.

Although this posed new challenges and an opportunity to thrive under pressure, the value that can be tied to this experience is strong. The COVID-19 pandemic reinforced the priority and value of workplace safety and health.

This helped redefine safety in our industry, from personal protective equipment all the way to personal hygiene. And it helped demonstrate just how essential and versatile our industry is.

Dr. Denise Koh, Chief Occupational Medical Officer of Workplace Safety and Health, outlines the lessons we can take from the COVID-19 experience. She explains how essential workplace risk assessments were for mitigating risks during the pandemic.

"This should mean more people are experienced and comfortable doing them, and if they continue to use risk assessments as part of their health and safety programs, we should see a reduction in near misses, accidents, injuries and deaths in the workplace," Koh states.

"Increased safety and improved safety culture moving forward are huge positives. The importance of vaccination and overall health promotion/disease prevention in a workplace context has become part of our regular dialogue, which is a major win."

Construction workers were flexible to maintain progress. With ever-changing



restrictions, amplified risks and the rise of variants, each day posed a new challenge.

Don Hurst, MHCA's Director of WORKSAFELY® Education and Training, defines our industry as "adaptable".

How can this prepare us for the next wave? Koh suggests every business look internally at their overall approach and performance in the pandemic, at what worked, what didn't and what could use improvement.

"I suggest companies look at and update their pandemic plans, how they assess risk; the protective measures they put into place; any policies that can be optimized to minimize risk; and how they communicated internally, externally and with the government," Koh adds.

"Be prepared by planning for change." Adjusting policies and procedures with ever-changing restrictions is key for a successful pandemic plan.

"One big positive is that workplace safety and health has become much more visible as a field and there is an overall awareness of how vital workplace safety and health is to our overall welfare as a province/community," she states.

MHCA's WORKSAFELY® safety advisors are here to help implement and maintain such policies and procedures.