

CLEAN START

FAIR DEAL FOR CLEANERS



17 October 2009

CLEANING FOR HEALTH

KEY POINTS

- The link between cleaning and health has become a growing threat to building owners under broad OHS requirements in relation to duty of care to prevent the spread of disease and other health risks that may result in breaches of OHS laws and regulations.
- High workloads, high work intensity and poor equipment provision do not produce the kind of quality clean that is vital for providing a healthy and safe working environment.
- The Clean Start Agreement provides the environment necessary for a quality healthy clean by linking shift hours to the size of area to be cleaned.

Each year, illness costs business billions of dollars in terms of hours lost to staff absences and lowered productivity rates. The World Health Organization (WHO) has found that biological air contamination in indoor environments is associated with half of all absenteeism in the workforce.¹

Air quality within the built environment has a major impact on air borne viruses and respiratory illnesses with “bad air” the main cause of Legionnaires Disease and Sick Building Syndrome (SBS).² Sick Building Syndrome is predominantly associated with office buildings³ and the CSIRO estimates it costs Australian businesses \$10 billion annually due to fact that “the air inside buildings is often more polluted than the air outside”.⁴

The literature on airborne illnesses commonly refers to the following categories of pollutants that impact significantly on indoor air quality:

- dust and dirt;
- moulds and mildews; and
- airborne gasses.

Effective cleaning systems are vital to neutralising these threats to office workers’ health. Regular cleaning of furniture and carpets has been proven to decrease the level of inhaled allergens such as pollens, moulds and dust mites, thereby improving air quality.⁵

The 2001 NSW Legislative Assembly inquiry into SBS prevention suggested that: “*Cleaning protocols or standards need to be reviewed or established to guarantee that cleaning is carried out for the*

¹ G Polkington, ‘Desk Valet Services Can Cut Bacteria by 90%’, *InClean Australasia*, June/July 2007.

² Indoor Environments Division, *Indoor Air Facts, no.4 (revised) Sick Building Syndrome*, US Environmental Protection Agency, Washington DC, February 1991, viewed 20 September 2009, < <http://www.epa.gov/iaq/pubs/sbs.html>>.

³ Standing Committee on Public Works, *Sick Building Syndrome*, Report no. 52/07, NSW Legislative Assembly, Sydney, April 2001.

⁴ CSIRO, *New Millennium Science for Industry*, Media Release, CSIRO, Ryde, 29 August 2000.

⁵ WorkCover NSW, *Assessment of the repetitive manual tasks of cleaners*, p. 18.

purpose of protecting health (and not just for appearance)...Realistic timeframes for cleaning contractors to properly clean buildings need to be ensured".⁶

Property owners have a duty of care under various OHS apparatus to provide a healthy and safe environment for *all* workers including common areas and air quality within their built environment.⁷ The risk of catching a disease falls under this ambit.⁸

"Cleaning for healthy air is a unique value added service to clients concerned about the health of their tenants and a safe guard against possible future health related litigation".⁹

The workplace is a key area for the transmission of disease.¹⁰ Dr Charles Gerba conducted a study into the type of germs typically found in an office environment. The study revealed that office phones house approximately 25,127 microbes, the average desk has 400 times more bacteria than a toilet seat¹¹ and the enter and send buttons on fax machines carry some of the highest concentration of harmful microbes,¹² with some viruses being able to survive on hard surfaces for up to two days after contamination¹³.

To avoid the office becoming an incubator for disease, having proper surface cleaning protocols is the most effective way to prevent outbreaks¹⁴. Property owners and cleaning companies need to make sure that cleaners' have the time and equipment to perform these tasks thoroughly, and are not squeezed by excessive workloads and work rates. The Clean Start Agreement provides fair workloads <hyperlink> and minimum shifts of 4 hours where the total cleaning area is more than 5,000 square metres.

Property owners have an excellent opportunity to support a focus on a quality and healthy clean in their buildings during the tendering process by ensuring that their tender meets the Clean Start Agreement standards.

⁶ Standing Committee on Public Works, *Sick Building Syndrome*.

⁷ NSW OHS 2001 Regulations, Act 8 (2)

⁸ *Take steps now to prepare for pandemic*, OHS Alert, 29 April 2009

⁹ Brian Clark 'Selling IAQ as a value added premium service', *InClean Australasia*

¹⁰ J Schuller, lawyer, microbiologist and biochemist as quoted in *Australia fails swine flu test*, Safety in Action Conference, Brisbane, June 2009, viewed 20 September 2009, <<http://siaconference.websynergy.com.au/News/SwineFlu/>>.

¹¹ G Polkington, op. cit..

¹² Associated Press, *What Germs Lurk Inside Your Keyboard?*; AOL Australia, Sydney, 30 July 2008, viewed 20 September 2009, <<http://www.aol.com.au/lifestyle/story/What-germs-lurk-inside-your-keyboard/782631/index.html>>.

¹³ G Whitely, 'Influenza Guidelines Ignore TGA System', *InClean Australasia*, June 2009.

¹⁴ G Polkington, op. cit.