



THE UNIVERSITY  
of TEXAS

SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH

# Research Issues Related to Vulnerable Workers: Health and Safety Concerns Among University Housekeepers

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# Background

- ▶ 1991:
  - Housekeepers working at the University of North Carolina (UNC) formed the Housekeepers Association (HKA)
  - HKA filed a grievance with UNC
- ▶ 1995:
  - N.C. Supreme Court denied UNC's petition to dismiss the grievance
  - The HKA responded with a "Modest Proposal"

# Modest Proposal

“For generations, HK workers have enabled educational and economic advancement for others while being denied the same opportunities.”

# The Housekeepers' Health Study

- ▶ 1996:
  - HKA and UNC reached a settlement agreement that included a study to assess the working conditions of the housekeepers.
- ▶ 1997:
  - Faculty from the School of Public Health worked with housekeepers to draft a proposal to study the health and working conditions of the University Housekeepers.
- ▶ 1998: **The Study to include:**
  - Literature Review of prior HK Studies, Policy Review, Focus Groups, Work Walk-Through Surveys, Health Survey

# N.C. Public Service Union: UE Local 150

- ▶ Right to Work State
- ▶ North Carolina and Virginia
  - ban collective bargaining among state workers

# Partnered with Key HKA Personnel

- ▶ The Housekeepers Association
  - Included HKs employed for several years
  - Representative who lead this effort: Barbara Prear

# Focus Groups

- ▶ HKA Leaders
- ▶ Supervisors
- ▶ Housekeepers working in:
  - academic affairs classrooms
  - laboratory buildings
  - dormitories

# Walk-Through Surveys

- ▶ For each walk-through, we met separately with the supervisor and HKs for that building
- ▶ 15 buildings on campus (dormitories, health affairs, library, laboratories)
- ▶ During the walk-through surveys, HK were informed that they would be receiving a mail survey



# Findings

old embalming drain



*“If I’m good enough to clean up the office and make them look very nice, why is it that the place that I have to chill out for 10 minutes is a broom closet.”*

# Break Rooms

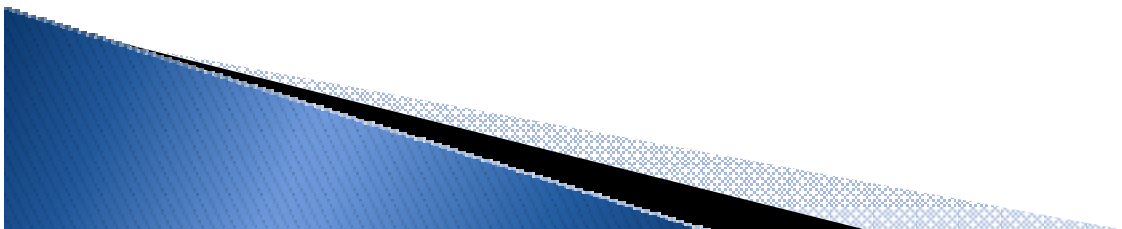


*“It’s not a break room. You see, I’m in there with buffers and stuff is all over the place..”*

# Building Temperatures

Housekeeper who works night shift:

*“In the winter time, it be so cold in there because they don’t turn the heat on until the secretaries come to work at a certain time”*



# Health Problems

## Floor Stripping Agent

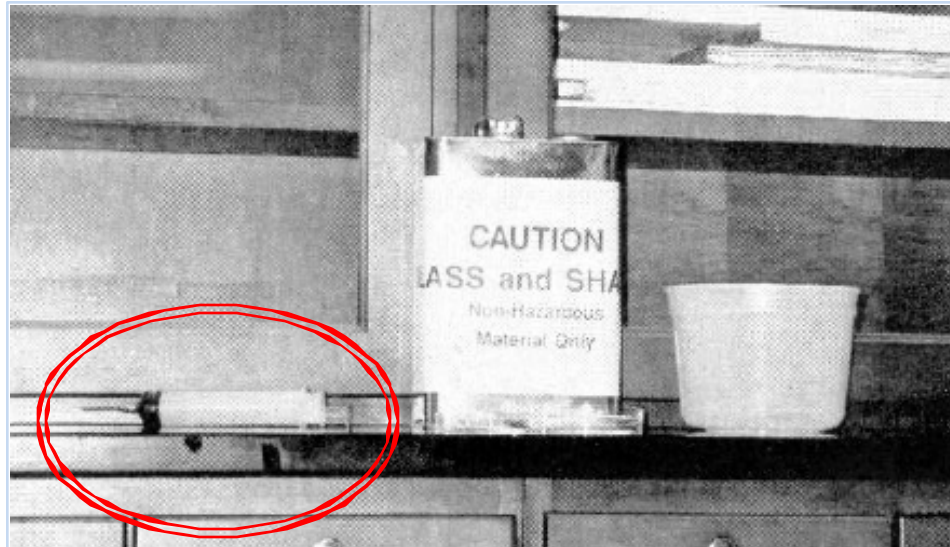
*“....it’s a certain kind of stripper...I couldn’t get nowhere near it. I could feel it burning my face”*

*“If you breathe it, it make you sick, nauseated, dizzy”*

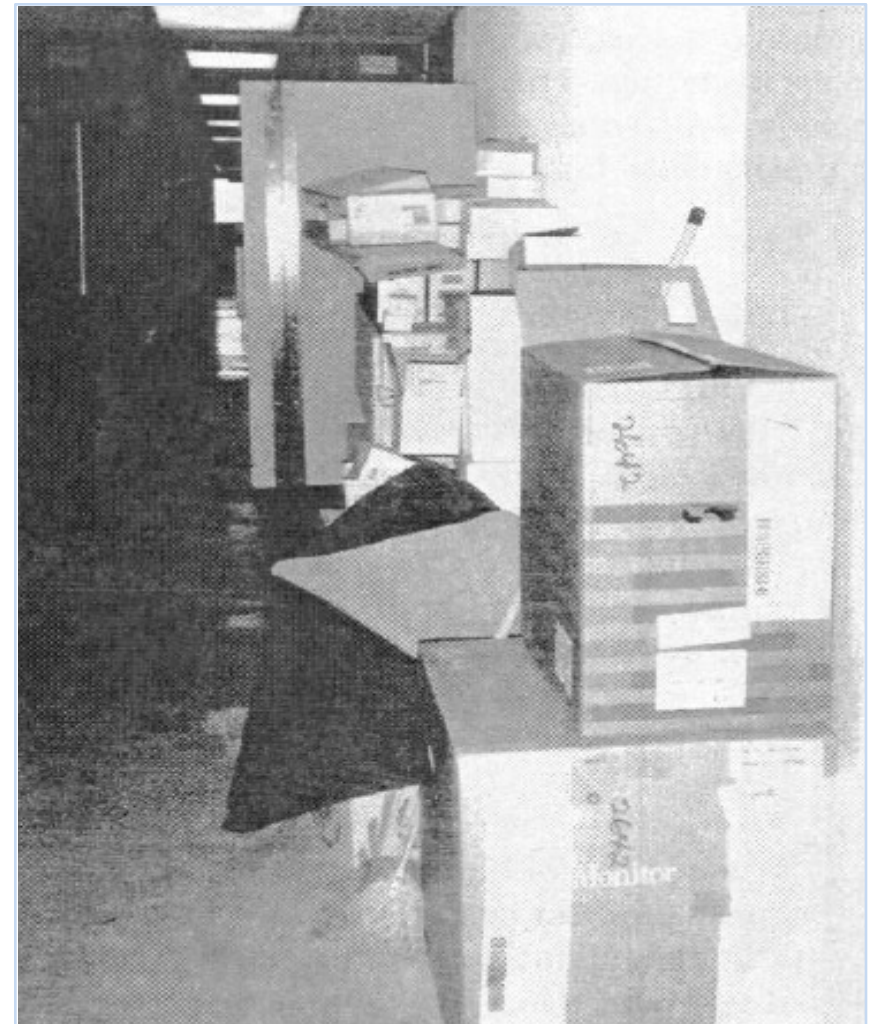
# Personal Protective Equipment

*“I work in a building with asbestos and it’s peeling off. They want me to sweep it off and I don’t feel safe. They give you a mask but it don’t keep the dust out of your eyes when you sweep”*

# Laboratories



Sharps left on lab bench



crowded hallways

# Equipment



*picture provide by Google*

*“When you get a vacuum cleaner...they get heavy when you have to bring them from the first floor to the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor. It causes your back to hurt”*

*“...carrying those machines up them steps, we shouldn’t have to do that. They should have a machine on each floor, especially if you don’t have an elevator.”*



# Wages

- ▶ 24 (57%) of HK who participated in the focus groups have second jobs.

*“What they assign you to do – it ain’t equal to that pay.... when you have to go in on Mondays, like when they have to haul that trash out, or go in that bathroom where that feces and urine and whatever’s in there– it’s not equal.”*



# Health Survey

- ▶ Concerns about injury/illness
- ▶ Work place policies
- ▶ Level/Comfort with training
- ▶ Treatment by management
- ▶ Health problems attributed to work

# Health Survey

- ▶ Hand delivered to each department
- ▶ Talked with HK and asked them to complete the survey
- ▶ Ensured confidentiality
- ▶ Provided with pre-stamped envelope, returned through USPS
- ▶ HKA representatives reinforced the importance of completing the survey

# Survey Respondents

- ▶ Response rate:  $210/320 = 66\%$
- ▶ female: 61%
- ▶ evening/night shift: 57%
- ▶ mean years age: 45.5
- ▶ mean years worked as HK: 6.7
- ▶ mean years worked at University: 9.3

# Safety at Work

	Yes
Given enough information about the risks of the job	65%
Comments about working conditions valued by supervisor	64%
Concerned that job exposes them to <b>unhealthy</b> conditions	60%
Concerned job exposes them to <b>unsafe</b> conditions	54%
Risks involved with work are just part of the job	62%
Security poor where they work	38%
Concerned that they will be physically attacked	23%
Considered leaving or changing job because it is unsafe	18%

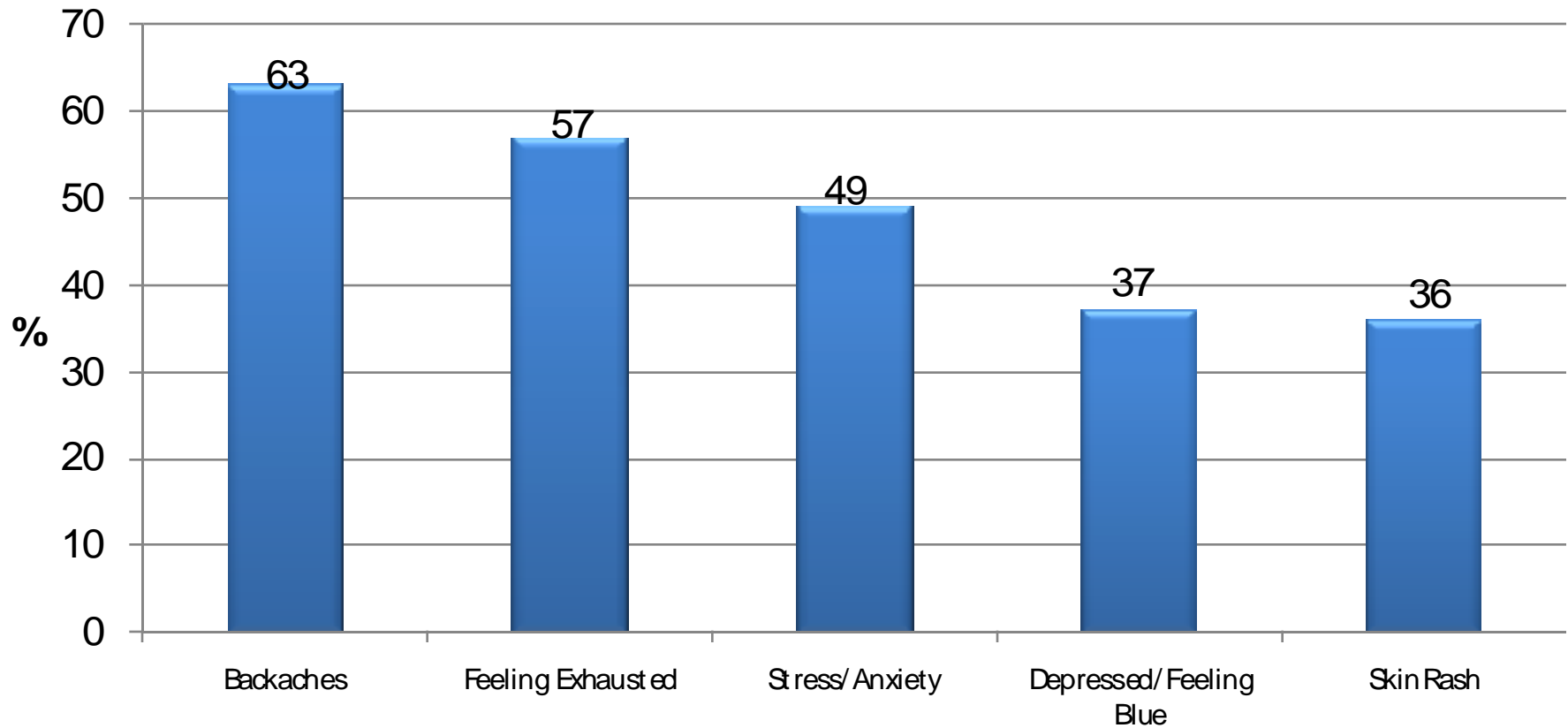
# I am concerned that I could be harmed because I am exposed to...

	Yes
Other people's germs	69%
Germs and viruses that are used in the lab	43%
Very hot temperatures	38%
Slippery and cluttered floors	35%
Chemical splashes, spills	29%
Very cold temperatures	30%

# I am concerned that I could be harmed because my job involves...

	Yes
Lifting or moving heavy objects	62%
Working with faulty equipment	60%
Working around sharp objects (e.g., needles)	43%
Cleaning with strong chemicals	39%
Using soaps and detergents	39%
Working around chemicals in labs	28%

# Work ever caused the following health problems...



# Recommendations

- ▶ Cleaning equipment should be located on each floor within buildings without elevators.
- ▶ Formal training should be provided on how to operate equipment such as floor buffers.
- ▶ All night shift workers should carry radios to ensure safety.
- ▶ Monthly safety meetings should be conducted to cover safety and health issues (i.e., blood borne pathogens).
- ▶ Routine maintenance of equipment should be provided.
- ▶ Adequate heating and cooling provided in buildings when school session is on break.
- ▶ Clean break rooms.



# The University's Response

- ▶ Changing from “Zone” cleaning to “Team” cleaning (2007)
  - Two pilot studies conducted
  - HK volunteered for pilot studies provided input
    - Workers will not work alone at night
    - New equipment purchased that was evaluated by the University Ergonomist
    - “Green” cleaning agents now used
    - Increased promotional opportunities within the department

# The University's Response

- ▶ Building design guidelines require:
  - The inclusion of a break area for HKs
  - HK closets meet certain size standards and that they be used solely for HK use
- ▶ All employees can file complaints anonymously
- ▶ UNC has tried unsuccessfully to address the issue of employees paying the full cost of health insurance for their families

# The Daily Tarheel

- ▶ 2000–2007: Over 70 articles have been published in the University newspaper about the Housekeepers.

# Conclusion

- ▶ Key personnel
  - HKA, Faculty
- ▶ Mix of qualitative and quantitative methods
- ▶ Consistency in findings between Focus Groups, Walk-Through Surveys, and Health Surveys