

Protecting Healthcare Workers Against Hazardous Medicinal Products

Ireland's trade union Fórsa and the European Biosafety Network are calling for greater protection for healthcare workers from long-term exposure to hazardous medicinal products, (HMPs) which can cause cancer, leukaemia and miscarriages in employees such as pharmacists, technicians, nurses and other workers in health and social care sectors.

Fórsa (Ireland's second largest trade union) and the European Biosafety Network (EBN), in association with the Hospital Pharmacists' Association of Ireland (HPAI) and the National Association of Hospital Pharmacy Technicians (NAHPT) hosted a joint summit in Dublin at the end of January.

The summit looked at the practical aspects of preventing occupational exposure of healthcare workers and professionals to hazardous medicinal products (HMPs).

Exposure to these products, often used to treat cancer and other life-threatening conditions, can happen anywhere from manufacture to preparation, administration and disposal. It can cause health impacts from headaches and hair loss to miscarriages, reproductive problems and different types of cancer.

Linda Kelly, Fórsa's National Secretary, said: "With the issue of exposure to hazardous medicinal products directly and indirectly impacting many of our members, it is imperative that awareness by employers and workers of the risks is improved. We now need to act to prevent the damaging health effects that exposure to HMPs can have on the workforce."

The union is calling for preventive measures and closed systems to be put in place to protect all workers potentially exposed to contamination. "We need to work holistically to ensure that all workers in health and social care are sufficiently protected when doing their jobs."

"The new EU Directive, which includes HMPs for the first time, must be transposed into Irish law by 5 April. The real work does not stop with changes to legislation or the implementation of new EU guidance; employers in Irish health and social care need to understand the risks of exposure to HMPs, implement controls and take immediate action to protect workers."

CALLS FOR INCREASED INSPECTIONS

Fórsa, the EBN, HPAI and NAHPT are calling on the Health Service Executive (HSE) to update its

'Guidelines on the Safe Handling of Cytotoxic Drugs' (published in February 2022) to include updates made to the new EU Directive and new EU guidance on handling HMPs. They have also pointed out that Health and Safety Authority (HSA) must also play a role by increasing inspections of healthcare and manufacturing sites which handle and produce HMPs.

The EU Directive on Carcinogens, Mutagens and Reprotoxins was amended in 2022 to include HMPs (as well as reprotoxic substances) within its scope for the first time. In April 2023, the EU published new guidance for the safe management of HMPs at work, which includes a much broader definition of HMPs, not just cytotoxic or cytostatic drugs, but also antivirals, hormones and hormonal antagonists, and immunosuppressants.

There is an updated and broader definition of HMPs in both the Directive and the new EU guidance on handling HMPs in the workplace and the EU are set to produce an indicative list of HMPs by 2025. Transposition of the EU legislation must take place in member states, including Ireland, by 5 April.

WORKER SAFETY SURVEY

The European Biosafety Network conducted a survey to determine the level of awareness and protection of workers in Ireland of the risk of exposure to HMPs and what safe handling measures were in place to prevent exposure, according to its secretary Ian Lindsley.

"Worryingly the results presented at the summit show a lack of awareness about the issue and low levels of risk assessments undertaken, coupled with insufficient training and a lack of preventive measures and surveillance of contamination," he added.

"EU legislation and guidance must be disseminated and implemented in Ireland to protect healthcare workers from potentially devastating health impacts due to exposure at work. Further progress needs to be made and fast."