A Job to Die For: Why So Many Americans Are Killed, Injured or Made Ill at Work and What to Do About It

Lisa Cullen, 204 pp, 2002. Common Courage Press: Monroe, ME. $17.95, Paperback

A Job to Die For, by Lisa Cullen, is a well-researched treatise of the pitfalls and the obstacles that can occur subsequent to a work-related injury or illness and entry into the workers compensation system. The book is also an accounting of what has gone wrong with the system for protection of workers’ health, safety, and compensation for those employees with work-related injuries and illnesses, from the perspective of the workers and their advocates. The author, a certified industrial hygienist, details the roles played by business, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), and Congress in defining the current status of workplace health and safety, as well as how each of these entities could impact this situation more positively. Other impediments to workplace health and safety are suggested, as the author reveals not only deficits in the collection of labor statistics, but also governmental agency refusal to release information that would allow identification of companies with high injury or mortality rates.

Because of Ms. Cullen’s familiarity and expertise within the arenas about which she writes, she does a remarkable job of investigative reporting (“scathing” according to one reviewer on the book jacket) with some guidance from OSHA insiders. A criticism, however, is that despite the overall accurate characterization of worker health, safety, and compensation in general, there are many cases in which workers’ compensation functions as intended, and these are not sufficiently addressed in this book. Because of this omission, the important message of how broken the system is might not reach as large an audience as it could, were a more balanced presentation attempted. Despite the considerable documentation of a severely broken system, it could come across as a less effective message when the occupational healthcare provider reading it has no sense of resonance with the experience. Rather than educate a potentially receptive audience among the occupational health providers, Ms. Cullen is more likely to “preach to the converted.”

Starting the book with a tragic [worst case scenario] case as this book does, although dramatic and serving to personalize the issue, likewise could dissuade some from further reading. The tone of the vignette not only suggests the author’s bias, but it is not apparent that more substantive information will follow. This is particularly important because Ms. Cullen’s solution to the problem (the “What To Do About It” portion of the title) lies in creating an informed and motivated public.

This book paints quite a devastating picture of occupational health in the United States. Although states have varied workers compensation laws and some readers will be better able to relate to issues highlighted in the book, the author’s experience and perspective regarding policies and practices, especially at the corporate and federal levels, are a worthwhile read. Despite my previous caveats, I strongly recommend the book for all occupational healthcare providers regardless of their corporate, labor, or “elsewhere along the continuum” affiliations. A Job to Die For is a good beginning point for discussion to reassess the current status of our progress in worker health and safety.

Debra Milek, MD, PhD, MPH
DOI: 10.1097/01.jom.00009496.69616.5a