

THE HIERARCHY OF CONTROLS AS POETRY

By Eric Persaud

Workers are too often given PPE as their first line of defense to workplace safety and health hazards. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic response for many workplaces was to emphasize an overreliance on masking instead of controls that may have isolated the SARS-CoV-2 virus and encouraged overall safer practices.

Applying the hierarchy of controls can advance protection of workers. This article introduces a humanities approach to raise worker and management awareness to the hierarchy of controls. Humanities, including poetry, may have an impact on healing when integrated into medicine (Campo, 2006; Pories et al., 2018). The author suggests that poetry can also be used as a form of prevention to safety and health risks in occupational medicine and as an act of healing for both the worker and trainer.

The Hierarchy of Controls as Poetry

The NIOSH (2022) hierarchy of controls is a way to determine a preferred order of actions to reduce or remove workplace hazards. The most effective safety measure is to eliminate the hazard by removing it physically (elimination). If elimination is not practical, the second most effective safety measure is to substitute or replace the hazard with a safer option (substitution). After those preferred options, next is the modification of work environments to isolate the hazard away from the workers (engineering controls). The next-to-last preferred actions are focused on worker behavioral change, for example, through worker training (administrative controls). The last line of defense, PPE, is what workers wear as a final barrier of protection from hazards.

The following poem has the inverted pyramid shape of the hierarchy of controls and follows the same preferred order of actions.

“Hierarchy of Controls”

*Be gone! Removed from place and space,
if not—then we shall need to replace,
otherwise isolate it all away,
or you’ll have to change
the workers’ ways,
with the last
line being
this hard
hat of
mine*

In the first line, “removed from place and space” describes actions in accordance with elimination. The second line, “need to replace,” aligns with substitution. In the third line, the use of the word “isolate” is meant to emphasize engineering controls,

which are methods designed to confine the hazards away from the at-risk worker. Next, lines four and five mention “change the workers’ ways,” which is in alignment with administrative controls. Changing worker behaviors and practices such as through worker training, workplace policy and procedure are examples of administrative controls. Finally, lines six to 10 demonstrate that PPE is the “last line” and uses a hard hat to represent the use of PPE for protection. Commas in the poem are used to separate each level in the hierarchy of controls. Line 11 contains only a period to conclude the poem and help emphasize that PPE is the final resort of safety.

Poetry as a Tool

OSH trainers and other professionals are encouraged to use this poem or create their own to raise awareness of the hierarchy of controls and other safety topics. Trainers interested in using poetry as a training tool or technique can use this example to help frame their own content and material specific to their audiences. Poetry can be a creative process and need not conform to a set grammatical structure. However, when appropriate, it is recommended that trainers tie their poetry into the safety topic and allow for the reader to be able to identify those connections in a way that raises their awareness to the hazard.

The “Hierarchy of Controls” poem offers such connections as an example of how to ensure that it aligns with the training content. Furthermore, the author hopes this example stimulates the discussion and use of humanities-based approaches, such as poetry, in the training and education of workers across occupations and industries. While not discussed in this article, other examples of humanities-based approaches that safety professionals may want to consider include fiction writing, short stories, photography and visual art.

Healing Worker & Safety Professional

Safety professionals who want to apply the concept of a humanities approach in areas

besides worker training are encouraged to consider the technique in the act of healing and recovery. While the “Hierarchy of Controls” poem offers an example of injury prevention, the humanities can be used in occupational health to address individuals who experiencing pain, both physically and mentally. A worker suffering from a workplace injury or illness may find the act of creating poetry reflective and meditative during the healing process. The safety professional, for example, during the emotionally difficult times of the COVID-19 pandemic, may find the act of creating poetry about the OSH conditions and environments they have witnessed and worked to address as a way to cope (Campo & New, 2021; Kleiber, 2021).

There are examples of the integration of humanities in medical education and training, which has been well received (Pories et al., 2018). The author suggests that such integrative approaches in occupational medicine can have similar feedback, among both workers and safety professionals. The dissemination of occupational health humanities may help prevent workplace injury and illness. However, the creation and development of such humanities may help the safety professional heal themselves during times when hope is most needed. **PSJ**

References

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