Have an Eye for Safety, or an Eye That’s Achy!

Disclaimer: This case study was prepared by Noor Arshad and Adam Colavecchio under the supervision of Dr. Frances Tuer, DeGroote School of Business, solely for the purpose of discussion. While the injury in the case actually took place all details of person(s) and organization(s) have been disguised.

**The Injury/Illness:**

The clock was ticking. With only fifteen minutes remaining in his shift, Miguel rushed to clean the last bit of the floor with the Kaivac machine. While rushing to finish the job, Miguel noticed dirt and residue in a corner of the event room. Short on time, Miguel ignored the volume and pressure of the harsh chemicals spraying through the Kaivac machine. He pointed the machine towards the corner, failing to anticipate the potential harm that could occur. In a split second, it was too late, the chemical solution reflected off the flat surface, against the wall, and sprayed directly into his naked eye. Miguel cried in pain. The extreme burning sensation and blurred vision caused him to fall to the floor as he was trying to cope with this painful eye injury. With the serious burn and pain, Miguel was unable to finish the job. Along with the incomplete promise of having the room cleaned and ready for tomorrow, a huge mess had also been created from the chemical spill and the wet floor. Despite being worried about his health, Miguel had other things on his mind. Miguel was panicking, and the inability to fulfill the job was not the only reason.

**Who and What:**

Miguel Jimenez, an immigrant worker who recently moved to Canada from Costa Rica. After constant rejections, even for small odd jobs, a janitor position in his town's nearby elementary school felt like a great opportunity. The elementary school administration was the first to give Miguel a chance to earn some much-needed income. He had hoped to eventually earn permanent employment at the school. To put his skills to the test, the principal instructed Miguel to clean up the event room for a very important council meeting to be held at the school the next morning. Miguel happily accepted the request and took on the responsibility with confidence and determination.

**Background on this type of Injury:**

The type of injury seen in this case involves an eye injury caused by chemical exposure. Eye injuries are very serious as they can cause permanent damage to the eye, as well as vision loss and blindness. Typically, most eye injuries including those caused by chemicals, occur mostly due to lack of proper protective eyewear such as goggles, or face shields (Workplace Eye Injury Statistics, 2017). Some of the common causes of eye injuries are flying objects such as bits of metal, tools, particles, and of course chemicals (Eye Injuries at Work, 2016). Not wearing the correct Personal Protective Equipment, workers allow these harmful objects and chemicals to enter the eyes, which in return cause many injuries. Also, not using proper workplace equipment such as eyewashes, and assuming that the injury is not as serious as it really is, will cause the injury to worsen (Eye injuries - chemical burns, 2018).

The specific eye injury illustrated in this case is a chemical eye burn which occurs when there is any chemical exposure to the eye or eyelid. Chemical burns contribute to roughly 7-10% of all eye injuries (Chemical Eye Burns, 2018). According to statistics, 300,000 workplace eye injuries send people to the emergency room each year in the United States (Workplace Eye Injury Statistics, 2017). Of these 300,000, 90% could have been avoided if workers wore appropriate protective eyewear (Workplace Eye Injury Statistics, 2017). Most workers say they choose not to wear protective eyewear because it’s unwearable, unnecessary, it fogs up, and it is simply not cool (Workplace Eye Injury Statistics, 2017). 40% of the on the job eye injuries happen in the manufacturing, construction, and mining industries (Workplace Eye Injury Statistics, 2017). Other maintenance jobs, such as janitors, are a common occupation where chemical eye injuries can occur as well (Common Injuries for Janitorial Employees, 2018). Many measures have been taken to prevent eye injuries in the workplace, more specifically injuries resulting from chemical exposure. The most obvious measure has been to ensure that workers are always using the required PPE when handling or engaging with objects and chemicals that have the potential of entering and damaging the eyes (Eye Injuries - chemical burns, 2018). Many suggestions have been given to workers in the past to try and reduce eye injuries from occurring. The first is to avoid wearing contact lenses, as they may absorb the chemical and concentrate the burn on the eye surface (Eye Injuries - chemical burns, 2018). Also, to ensure workers keep safety equipment in good condition, as safety shields and goggles constantly need to be repaired or replaced (Eye Injuries - chemical burns, 2018). In addition, it is vitally important to read product labels and its Material Safety Data Sheet for information on safe handling (Eye Injuries - chemical burns, 2018). Employers are responsible for ensuring that the eyewash stations are functioning properly, and to perform regular inspections for proper functionality (Eye Injuries - chemical burns, 2018). A very crucial last point is that employees must not judge the seriousness of an eye injury based on the degree of pain, as this can cause the condition to worsen (Eye Injuries - chemical burns, 2018).

**What to do Next?**

Miguel was stressed and was in a dilemma. He wondered, “Should I report the injury or not?”. Upon acceptance of employment, Miguel had promised to make an extra effort in hopes to impress the boss to earn a permanent position. He wanted to prove that he was a better choice than the existing janitor working at the school, who had temporarily gone on sick leave. But with such clear intentions and responsibility, where did Miguel go wrong? At the time of hiring, the boss had made it clear to Miguel that all necessary PPE, such as safety goggles, specifically required for his role, was to be worn at all times. He also added that if any PPE equipment ran out of stock, it is mandatory for the employee to notify management immediately. While rushing to complete the job, Miguel had accidentally cracked his safety goggles. Instead of immediately stopping as per instructions, Miguel decided to continue without the safety goggles. He had made a quick effort to check the cupboard for a second pair, however, they were out of stock and no replacement pair was available. Miguel had noticed last week that goggles were out of stock, but he ignored the issue and decided not to notify management. He figured that since he already had a pair, no replacement pair would be needed. With only a small portion left for cleaning, Miguel was quick to assume that nothing dangerous could potentially happen to him. Failing to predict that an accident could occur and cause serious injury, Miguel suffered a severe eye injury due to the chemicals spraying directly into his eyes.

A couple of hours later, while waiting for the nurse to discharge him, Miguel thought hard. He could not decide if he should either report the injury as per legal protocol and prove his good ethics or risk immediate termination due to the careless behaviour he had possessed in terms of occupational health and safety. He was considering the potential of receiving compensation to treat his serious injury, while also thinking about the possible implications he would have to deal with in regard to employment and salary. The thought of receiving zero compensation also crossed his mind due to his inability to follow instructions. Miguel was in a serious dilemma, and no option seemed to possess a win-win situation.