

## Defining an Industrial Hygienist

Industrial hygiene is a term designed to evoke a simple view of what the practice means. However, it comes from a time when the words had a different interpretation to them. *Hygiene* comes from the area of practice relating to cleanliness, sanitation, or health. Therefore, an Industrial Hygienist (IH) is a professional who is dedicated to the health and well-being of the worker. This has been expanded by the changing of our society from an industrial/agricultural base to more of a service economy to address issues of productivity. Today, it relates to an expansion of workplace to areas of the community outside the traditional place of employment.

Industrial hygienists are interdisciplinary by nature, spanning engineering and public health disciplines, and bring a problem-solving perspective. No other engineering or health science discipline brings this particular blend of training and expertise to the table. It is logical that industrial hygiene is the discipline of choice for problems of community health in environments affected by hazardous agents.

The traditional concepts of industrial hygiene, including principles of recognition, evaluation, and control, and concepts of source, path, and receiver form an important basis for conceptual understanding of health hazard assessment.

Many industrial hygienists must also become qualified and experienced in microbiology, ventilation, building science, cleaning and restoration, and risk communication to be effective indoor air problem-solvers. In the last 20 years, industrial hygienists have developed these and other skills necessary to manage indoor air problems, making them highly effective on behalf of building owners and occupants. Such expertise can be applied in industrial workplaces, public buildings, single and multifamily residences, and specialty buildings such as hospitals.

Skilled and experienced industrial hygienists are effective in diagnosing problem complexity and providing appropriate solutions. A current problem in North America is the involvement of persons without appropriate training and experience in the management of mold and moisture problems. Such individuals often have difficulty distinguishing small from large problems and are often criticized for applying solutions not matched to problem size. In such situations, public health or financial resources may be sacrificed.

A good industrial hygienist knows when his or her expertise is necessary and counsels clients about efficient use of resources. Society as a whole loses when efforts are not directed where they do the most good at the least cost. For this reason, it is important that industrial hygienists balance all competing interests in resolving issues involving health risks.

Understanding the limits of one's expertise as an industrial hygienist is essential. Some industrial hygienists may have specific training and experience in building engineering concepts, including architectural details pertaining to building construction. Others may have education and experience in toxicology and/or epidemiology. They may be qualified to address health issues affecting groups of individuals in the population, for example, working populations or susceptible populations such as immuno-compromised individuals or children. Most if not all are qualified to characterize the environment in terms of potential or actual metrics of exposure. But no industrial hygienist (without a medical degree) is qualified to physically examine an individual and express an opinion on the relationship between the environment and a particular individual's health status. That is the job of a physician or another medical professional with clinical expertise.