

A WORKERS' CLINIC

The African Food and Canning Workers Union (AFCWU) established its own clinic in Paarl in 1981. The establishment of the clinic enabled members of the Union's medical benefit fund to receive treatment at the clinic. This has resulted in major savings to the Union and the Fund, and has enabled the Fund to provide a better service for all the workers who are members of it. Critical Health spoke to Denis Rubel, the doctor at the Union's Paarl clinic.

For the rest of this interview Critical Health will be referred to as CH and Denis Rubel as DR.

CH - What is the background to the establishment of the Paarl clinic ?

DR - The history goes back a long time. The Union established a Medical Benefit Fund over thirty years ago. Up to now the Fund has had a contract with certain private doctors to see those members of the Fund requiring medical attention. The increasing costs of medicines and the high profits of the doctors resulted in the Fund paying private doctors R30,000 - R40,000 per year.

The Union felt that much money could be saved by employing a doctor and providing all medicines at cost. The Fund has in fact saved a lot of money since the opening of the Clinic. This has resulted in improved benefits not only for the people in Paarl who use the Clinic, but also for members of the Fund in other parts of the country. For example, the average cost for medicines at the Clinic was R1.40 for each worker, whereas private doctors were charging the Fund an average of R4.70 per worker. The money saved in this way goes towards providing a better service for all members of the Fund.

CH - Besides the financial benefits, what other benefits have resulted from the establishment of the Clinic?

DR - We have been able to identify more precisely the health problems from which workers suffer. Back-pain and shoulder-spasm are very common amongst

workers on the conveyor belt line. People who have just started working on the conveyor-belts tend to get vertigo (a type of dizziness) . There are also various skin conditions which result from working with acidified fruit. The most common condition of this sort is known as "vrugtevinger" (fruit-finger) which is a combination of inflammation of the skin and infection.

There are also some particular processes which have led to problems, for example, in the production of certain types of yoghurt. A chemical called sulphur dioxide is poured into the yoghurt to preserve it , and many workers have been burned on their skin by this chemical.

CH - Has the Union managed to take up these issues and demand improvements ?

DR - The Union certainly would like to take up health and safety issues. However, these can only be taken up when the Union is in a very strong position and able to demand changes from management. At the moment we have a number of difficulties in the Union, and we have felt it better that I use my expertise and status to influence management rather than rely on the strength of the Union.



CH - Has the Union Clinic attracted many more workers to join the Union?

DR - I think many people are proud of the Clinic and happy with the service it provides. However, a union cannot try to increase its membership by offering "fringe" benefits. A union is not a benefit society. People must join the Union because the relationship between union organisers and the workers is good and because the Union is able to represent their views.

Last year I devised a scheme whereby workers in a milling factory where we were trying to organise would be able to use the Clinic services. The Union rejected the scheme because workers are not organised around medical services - they are organised around factory floor issues. It was difficult for me to accept that decision initially,

because I had thought I could play a useful part in attracting workers to join the Union. I learned an important lesson - that the benefits a union provides must be benefits that the workers want, and not benefits that existed from the start in the hope that they would attract workers to join the union.

Summary of Effects of Shiftwork	Proportion of work-force liable to be affected
Fatigue	All
Digestive disorders	Two-thirds
Stomach ulcers	Increased incidence
Constipation	Increased incidence
Inadequate sleep	Half
Nueroses and nervous disorders	Two-thirds
Disruption of family life	Two-thirds
'Social isolation'	Three-fifths
Accidents	Increased rate

CH - What problems have you experienced in your work ?

DR - There are a number of problems relating to the Union's medical benefit fund. For historical reasons only a proportion of the Union members are members of the Fund. It is unfortunately only these workers who are able to use the Clinic. Also the Fund states that only the worker and not the worker's family

can receive medical benefits. This limits my ability to deal with the health problems of workers in a complete way. The facilities for referral are also poor and it is difficult to arrange X-Rays and other special tests. All of these things decrease the effectiveness of the Clinic.

CH - To what extent is the Clinic controlled by the workers ?

DR - Obviously this is desirable and the Clinic does represent a first step towards worker-controlled structures. In the past the Clinic was administered from the Union offices and workers could complain or make suggestions about the service to Union organisers. All complaints are taken very seriously and changes to the service made where possible.

We intend establishing a workers' committee that will be responsible for administering the Clinic. We would like this committee to report back to the other Union members regularly and also to get feedback from them about the service provided. It would be extremely advantageous to have open and public criticism so that the whole process is seen to be a much more democratic process. The Clinic staff and the services provided would be answerable directly to the workers. All these changes would lead to the service being under much more genuine control by the workers.

"HOMELAND TRAGEDY" - function and farce

This is the title of a new publication issued by the Southern African Research Service (SARS). The publication contains a number of articles dealing with the rural bantustans, including one on health entitled "Fragmenting Health in the Homelands".

The publication is available at a cost of R1.00 from SARS, PO Box 93174, Yeoville 2143, South Africa.

