

SOLVING OH&S ISSUES TOGETHER – A MULTI-DISCIPLINED APPROACH TO NOISE CONTROL IN THE RNZAF

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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines how the RNZAF has established a comprehensive Noise Management and Hearing Conservation programme, conducted by a range of Air Force OH&S practitioners, i.e. Occupational Hygienists, Safety Advisors, Occupational Health Nurses and Unit Health and Safety Representatives.

The multi-disciplinary approach adopted has resulted in all practitioners contributing to the programme, from Health and Safety Representatives performing preliminary noise assessments and delivering basic noise awareness courses to their colleagues, through to Occupational Hygienists conducting specialist noise surveys. This tiered approach is supported by in-house training and regular refresher courses that ensure all personnel have appropriate competency levels for their role in the programme.

The RNZAF has a Noise Management Programme that involves a range of Air Force OH&S practitioners working together in establishing and addressing noise issues within the various environments of RNZAF activities.

INTRODUCTION

The Royal New Zealand Air Force is a large organisation with its personnel working not only in New Zealand but around the world. The nature of its work, both at home and on operational duties, exposes its people to numerous hazards, many of which do not normally occur within most civilian workplaces. However, like their civilian counterparts, one of the most common hazards facing RNZAF personnel is noise. Due to the type of work carried out and the environments that personnel work in there is the potential for exposure to significant noise levels and a real risk of noise induced hearing loss.

Recently the RNZAF has recruited or trained a number of specialists in the various OH&S disciplines, including occupational hygienists, occupational health nurses and additional safety personnel to help the organisation move from reactive to proactive OH&S management. As part of this refocus one of the first major projects for the occupational hygienists to address was that of noise exposure and noise induced hearing loss.

THE RNZAF NOISE MANAGEMENT PROGRAMME

On considering the issue of noise exposure and noise induced hearing loss in the RNZAF there was a lot of anecdotal evidence of a problem but little recent hard facts or figures to indicate if this problem was real or perceived. However subsequent fact finding visits to all of the Bases showed this anecdotal evidence to be correct. It was quickly recognised that to proactively and effectively manage noise exposure and noise induced hearing loss across the whole RNZAF, a comprehensive and coordinated noise management programme was needed. Some elements of such a programme were already in place e.g. audiometric testing, but these elements were often managed by different parts of the organisation and tended to be reactive rather than proactive. The two RNZAF occupational hygienists soon realised that there were not enough of them to carry out noise surveys across all RNZAF workplaces in a timely manner. Consequently it was decided that personnel at all levels of the OH&S organisation would need to be involved.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROGRAMME

The Policy

The first step was to develop an updated RNZAF Noise Policy that incorporated ideas from various professionals in the OH&S Directorate. This document not only sets out the RNZAF policy as it relates to noise but describes procedures for achieving the policy's aims, assigns responsibilities to various personnel and defines coverage. This includes preliminary and detailed noise assessments, regular reviews and how to deal with new equipment and potential noise issues before it arrives on a Base. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the document describes the required competencies for each person who has a role in the programme, what training they need to achieve this competency and how they maintain it in the future.

Competency and Training

To provide the levels of competencies defined in the Policy two training courses were developed: the RNZAF Basic Noise Course and the RNZAF Intermediate Noise Course. Furthermore, a number of education packages were also developed to provide personnel with information on the programme, noise as a hazard, the risk to their hearing, what steps they should take to minimise that risk and how to obtain, use and maintain personal hearing protection devices.

Underpinning the RNZAF Noise Management Programme are the Unit Health and Safety Representatives. They are required to complete the Basic Noise Course which certifies them as RNZAF Basic Noise Assessors. This course, run by the Safety Advisors, certifies them for two years after which they have to complete a refresher course in order to maintain their assessor status. Basic Noise Assessors carry out preliminary noise assessments, 2 yearly reviews, and also provide training to their colleagues on why noise induced hearing loss is a problem, how to avoid it and how to correctly wear and maintain any hearing protection devices issued.

Providing support to the Basic Noise Assessors and carrying out a significant amount of the noise survey work are the OH&S professionals; not only the Safety Advisors and the Occupational Health Nurses, but also Environmental Health staff. These personnel are required to complete the Intermediate Noise Course which certifies them as RNZAF Intermediate Noise Assessors. This course, run by the Occupational Hygienists, certifies them for three years after which they have to complete a refresher course in order to maintain their competency. The Safety Advisors train the Basic Noise Assessors, support and oversee their work and carry out any detailed noise surveys identified by the preliminary assessments. The RNZAF has set its in-house action level at 80 dB(A) and if a preliminary assessment indicates that levels are above this then a detailed survey has to be conducted. The Occupational Health Nurses will manage the audiometric monitoring programme and through educating personnel will help them gain a better understanding of noise in the workplace and how to look after the hearing protection devices. Environmental Health personnel carry out detailed noise surveys on overseas operations and exercises.

The final level of support is that provided by the Occupational Hygienists. Their role is to carry out specialist work identified through the preliminary and detailed noise assessments, which includes octave band analysis, measuring noise levels in excess of 110 dB(A), ultra and infra sonic sound and all aircraft noise surveys. They also maintain the RNZAF Noise Policy and all the training courses and educational packages, instruct the Intermediate Assessors course and support the other OH&S and Environmental Health personnel. Finally they are involved in improving the noise protection from passive and communication headsets issued to RNZAF air and ground crews both at home and overseas.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROGRAMME

The RNZAF Noise Management Programme was implemented in March 2008 when the first RNZAF Intermediate Noise courses were run resulting in all the Safety Advisors being trained. Since then the Safety Advisors have run a large number of Basic Noise Courses and as of August 2008 approximately 158 RNZAF Health and Safety Representatives have been trained. Many of these Basic Noise Assessors have completed their preliminary noise assessments and some have also delivered the general training package to personnel in their Units or Squadrons. Concurrently Commanders and Managers have been briefed on the programme and their responsibilities.

Approximately 50% of locations where preliminary assessments have been completed require detailed surveys to be carried out, some of which have been conducted.

Although the programme is still in its early stages a positive impact is already apparent. Awareness levels are rising, personnel are requesting more information and acting on the instruction received and becoming proactive in identifying potential noise issues before they occur.

CONSULTATION

Throughout the development of the Noise Management Programme input and feedback was sought from all the RNZAF OH&S professionals. All comments received were considered and the vast majority were acted upon and subsequent changes made. Most considered the biggest benefits to be that competencies and who was responsible for each of the tasks were defined.

Since the programme has been implemented feedback is being actively sought from all those involved so that the programme can be reviewed and amended to ensure it continues to deliver the required outputs.

THE FUTURE

There is no end to this programme. Existing training courses will be reviewed, new courses and educational packages introduced and the skills of the OH&S professionals expanded. These developments will largely be driven by the Basic Noise Assessors and Safety Advisors as being at the work face they know what is required.

The RNZAF also plans to employ two more occupational health nurses and once in place they will be reviewing and, if required, revising the current audiometric monitoring programme.

The occupational hygienists are also constantly and actively looking at equipment new to the market, particularly hearing protection devices, which are suitable for use in the unique operational environments that the RNZAF operates in.

CONCLUSION

A new, proactive Noise Management Programme has been implemented throughout the RNZAF which utilises a range of OH&S practitioners working together in establishing and addressing noise issues within the various environments of Air Force activities. Thus far the programme has been well received and a positive impact is already apparent. This is an ongoing project that will continue for as long as noise sources exist within the RNZAF. Due to this ongoing commitment an important part of the programme is for all involved to maintain their competencies and to continue communicating with each other.