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AIC's Health & Safety Network Guide

Self-Advocacy for Health and Safety in Conservation & Collections Care

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Goal of document: Self advocacy, considering Health and Safety (H&S) generally in a new location or for a new project

Where to share: programs, ECPN, discussion boards, wiki

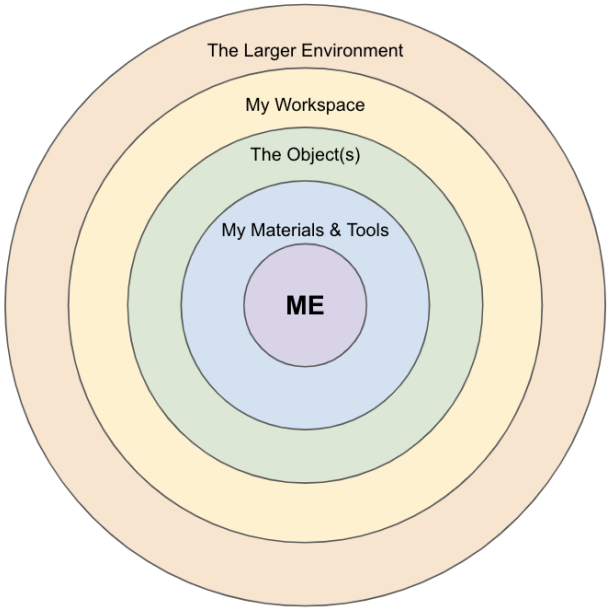
Whether you are working in a new environment or simply with a new artifact or treatment material, it is important to assess the situation through a health and safety (H&S) lens.

This document is for you if you can relate to *any* of these sentiments.

- I want to protect myself against health and safety risks but I do not know how.
- I am really interested in H&S and would like to learn and do more to build healthy and safe work environments for me and my colleagues.
- I am new to the field (emerging professionals, interns, students, volunteers, etc.), and I want to be sure I can recognize when I am encountering hazards and take steps to mitigate risks.
- I just started in a new job/lab/work environment. When am I encountering hazards?
- I am experiencing an adverse health effect due to workplace conditions, and I don't know how to talk about it to my supervisor and/or colleagues.
- I see something worrying or potentially dangerous going on at work, and I need help addressing it with my supervisor and/or colleagues.
- I am struggling with mental stress related to my job (the works of art themselves, nervousness about performing a treatment step, poor compensation, life instability, etc.)

How To Do a H&S Assessment

Starting with yourself and moving outwards, consider treatment materials and tools, the artifacts, your physical space, and even the broader landscape. Use the graphic and questions below to guide your assessment. This exercise can help center your work in conservation within a robust, risk-managed environment.



Example Assessment Framework

For each concentric circle, the final question could be ‘what are the risks that remain in proceeding in this way, and how can I reduce them’ (ie: regular breaks, reorganizing workspace, reviewing safety documents)?

- **Me:** How do I feel today, physically and mentally? What am I wearing - are my shoes a safe choice for the environment/work? Could jewelry, loose clothes, long hair, or work badges present a physical hazard to me or artifacts? What time of day is it? Do I feel pressure to proceed in a certain way or on a certain timeframe that introduces risks? How often should I work in stretch and/or eye breaks given the nature of this work?
- **My Materials and Tools:** What materials do I need? Chemicals - where will I use these? Is there a less-hazardous alternative? Review safety data sheets (SDS). What are the primary routes of exposure for these chemicals? Do they require ventilation for safe usage? How do I safely dispose of them? What tools will I use? Have I used them before? What personal protective equipment (PPE) do I need - is it properly fit for me? Is there manufacturer’s information I should review? What steps can I take to minimize my risk of exposure? Have I been adequately trained?

- **The Object(s):** Is there anything about this object that creates an issue surrounding my ability to access it? Might it require testing and/or analysis before I can work with it safely? May it be harmful to my mental health during my interactions with it?
- **My Workspace:** Am I working in climate-controlled spaces or in hot, cold, wet, or high-UV settings? Who else is working in this space today? Are there things we need to communicate to each other to keep all people safe? Are there trip hazards, sound hazards? Can I move to another space to reduce the impact of specific hazards?
- **The Larger Environment:** How is the air circulation? Is the space exposing people to high levels of air or sound pollution? Are members of the public potentially interacting with any conservation materials or artifacts that could present safety hazards? Did I make the choices I could honor my and/or my institutions priorities - inclusivity, environmental choices, education, etc.

Acknowledging the risks present does not mean avoiding completing the work but may introduce pathways to mitigate these risks or bring more of your awareness to them. **Regardless of the situation, communication is essential to a healthy and safe work environment.**

Addressing H&S Concerns

Prioritize your health and safety by self-advocating for a safe work environment. Everyone is entitled to and should be using the basic health and safety precautions as outlined in SDS and other safety documents. Conservation labs can look and function very differently (large and small institutions, universities, private labs, on-site treatment, archaeological sites in the US and abroad) but we want conservators safe in each environment as well as all of those who interact with the artifacts. The following suggestions are ways to help tackle health and safety problems.

What to do if I have been asked to do something unsafe?

- Be prepared to clearly state why it is unsafe
- Bring supporting documents such as the SDS or a lab's Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) to help bolster your confidence on the issue
- Frame questions around yourself. Suggestion: "Use "I" statements when discussing the topic with others. For example, "I am concerned that this work may put my respiratory health at risk because I have asthma."
- If in retrospect you realize something was unsafe, still address the topic with a supervisor so that in the future the situation can be resolved.

What to do if I see someone doing something unsafe?

- Speak to people one-on-one when addressing a H&S concern. Try to avoid putting the person "on the spot."
- Approach a peer directly, keep in mind that supervisors may need to be pulled in if the unsafe action is not resolved.

- If concerned about approaching a supervisor, you can approach a coworker to ask for advice on having a successful conversation.

What to do if I've encountered something but I don't know how to talk about it?

The following phrases may help begin a conversation:

- "I am curious about…"
- "Can we discuss the H&S risks around…"
- "I would like to learn more about how to protect myself in regard to…"
- "I would like additional training in…"
- "I would be more comfortable if…"
- "I just learned about this method that might work well for this. Can we try it?"

It is important to remember that people may have individual health concerns that may not be visible and that they may not be comfortable discussing (e.g. allergies, pregnancy, chronic health concerns).

Helpful Policies

The most successful H&S strategies require strong leadership, modeling best practices, and discussions of H&S principles, strategies, and specific actions. Conservation labs should be equipped with a variety of safety protocols developed within the conservation or collections care department (even a department of one person) or by a health and safety professional. Consider editing, updating, or creating any of the safe work protocols that may not be complete at your organization. All new staff, interns, and volunteers should be introduced to the safe work protocols, but just as important is ensuring that people review policies on a regular basis. Annual review of safety policies as a group may lead to better absorption and can help foster a safe work environment.

Safe work protocols include:

- General lab practices
- Annual chemical inventory (to be shared with fire professionals)
- Maintaining safe access to objects and materials in storage facilities
- Established protocols and supplies to address chemical spills
- Awareness of first aid options and procedures, including incident reporting
- Established pathways for safe disposal of hazardous materials
- Safety Data Sheets (SDS) for all materials and Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) for hazardous materials
- Chemical hygiene plan
- Job hazard or safety analyses, ideally with review by an EH&S professional
- Modeling best practices to set an example for other staff members, especially early career professionals

- Regular inspection of safety equipment (extinguishers, eyewash stations, showers) and any hazard-producing equipment (ex. x-radiography)
- Regular staff safety training
- Note: Many of these protocols will be enhanced by working with Environmental Health and Safety staff if they are available to you and your institution

More ways to create a safe working environment

- Ask questions of people you see using specific precautions to learn about their decision making process
- Maintain curiosity about topics - collect your own information and confirm information reported verbally through written resources
- Consider including H&S information in treatment reports, especially for unusual situations. This may help you or other future conservators to re-treat the object or apply to similar objects in the future.
- Pay attention to your body. Are you suddenly nauseous? Do you have a headache? Does it smell? Pause and consider if you need to adjust your materials, access to ventilation, or body posture.

What to do if voicing your concerns changes nothing

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) ensures safe working conditions in the 50 US states and certain jurisdictions including the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, American Samoa, Guam, Northern Mariana Islands, Wake Island, Johnston Island, and the Outer Continental Shelf Lands.

You have the right to file a confidential health and safety complaint and request an OSHA inspection (https://www.osha.gov/consultation) of your workplace if you feel unsafe at work.

Some states may have additional or more stringent safety requirements. The state health department or other administrator is another resource.

Individual institutions may also have internal EH&S departments that oversee safe working practices and should be well-versed in the regulations specific to your place of work.

Resources

Using readily available resources such as SDSs and SOPs (such as those available from major universities via search engines), will help fill in information gaps and make assessing risks much easier.

The AIC H&S Wiki is a great resource for a myriad of topics specifically relevant to those in collections care and conservation (https://www.conservation-

wiki.com/wiki/Category:Health_%26_Safety). Simply reviewing the topics available on the wiki will introduce categories of concern that may not be top of mind for everyone.

Health and Safety Network Glove Selection Guide
https://www.conservation-wiki.com/wiki/PPE_Chemical_Protective_Material_Selection_Guide

Hazards in Collections eTool
https://hazardsincollections.org.uk/

Connecting to Collections Care: Identifying and Managing Hazardous Materials In Museum Collections
https://connectingtocollections.org/hazardous-materials/

--Written by the Health & Safety Network and
The Education and Training Committee