

KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICE OF POSTGRADUATE LABORATORY TECHNICIAN STUDENTS ABOUT OCCUPATIONAL HAZARDS AND SAFETY MEASURES

By

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DOI: 10.21608/ejom.2023.207535.1309

Submit Date: 2023-05-05

Revise Date: 2023-06-03

Accept Date: 2023-06-07

Authors' contributions: All authors contributed equally in this work.

Abstract

Introduction: laboratory workers face several occupational health hazards at work. A laboratory hazard could cause damage or injury. **Aim of Work:** To assess the level of occupational safety measures and knowledge about occupational hazards among laboratory technicians' students and factors affecting their knowledge and safety practice. **Materials and Methods:** This is a descriptive cross-sectional study among 178 postgraduate laboratory technicians' students from Technical Health Institute in Mansoura, Egypt. Data were collected by a self-administered validated structured questionnaire based on previous studies. **Results:** Less than 50% of the studied technicians had good knowledge (47.2%), about safety measures including general administrative measures, personal protection, standard procedures and lab work area (77%, 71.3%, 59%, 72.5%; respectively). The most frequently reported occupational hazards are chemical hazards (55.6%) followed by ergonomic hazards (19.7%) and biological hazards (14%). Age and education are significant independent predictors of good occupational health knowledge. Moreover, knowledge, education and duration of employment are significant independent predictors for good safety practice. **Conclusion and Recommendations:** Knowledge of occupational health hazards and safety measures among laboratory technicians are not adequate. This can be improved through the organization of regular laboratory safety training. Developing national regulations for occupational lab health and safety is necessary. **Keywords:** Laboratory technician, Occupational hazards, Safety measures and Knowledge

Introduction

Employees in hospitals and health-care institutions are exposed to many risks, particularly, those dealing with clinical specimens, can be highly exposed to contamination and infection. Blood, tissue, or body fluid samples, along with medical waste, are potential biologic hazards and are considered to be the most significant foci of infections among laboratory employees (Kaplan and Emin, 2018). In addition to infection, chemicals, gases and solvents may be explosive, inflammable or toxic and this may cause fires, gassings and explosion in laboratory if not cautiously handled (Nisii et al., 2009). Other non-infectious hazards such as cuts, skin injuries, electrical shock, and burns due to corrosives are also common (Tohda, 2016).

Laboratory hazards are classified as biologic, chemical, physical, electric/mechanical–or psychological (Akagbo et al., 2017).

The exposure to occupational hazards arises mainly because of the way the laboratory staff handle their work and the precautions followed in their work environment (Sewunet et al., 2014). It was reported that about 66% of laboratory staff were exposed

to at least one type of biologic hazard, often being bacteria and parasites (Tait et al., 2018). In addition, risk of exposure increases due to inadequate and poor safety arrangements in the laboratory and absence of biosafety cabinets, safety manuals and safety kits. Another crucial factor is knowledge and awareness regarding occupational hazards in the laboratory and how to deal with in case of accidents (Shekhar et al., 2015).

The lack of awareness about safety matters is associated with poor handling and unsafe practices during collection, processing, and discarding of samples, potentially leading to enhanced exposure to microorganisms (Shafiq et al., 2019).

Occupational safety and preventive measures strengthen and sustain the physical, mental, and social well-being of workers across all occupational categories (Reda et al., 2021). A quasi-experimental previous study in our locality revealed that lab technicians working in teaching lab had poor knowledge and practices of safety measures that were improved after intervention (El-Gilany et al., 2017). So, it is required to assess hospital laboratory staff's knowledge, attitudes,

and practices regarding the likelihood to be exposed to workplace accidents (Senthil et al., 2015).

Aim of Work

To evaluate the knowledge level of occupational hazards and safety practice among postgraduate laboratory technicians and factors affecting their knowledge and safety practice.

Materials and Methods

Study design: A descriptive cross-sectional study.

Place and duration of study: This study was performed at the Technical Health Institute in Mansoura, Egypt, during the period from December 2021 to February 2022.

Study subjects: During the academic year 2021–2022, all postgraduate laboratory technician students were chosen.

Sample size: All registered postgraduate laboratory technician students (n=210). One hundred eighty-seven out of 210 (84.8%) were regular attendants and completed the questionnaires.

Study methods: An Arabic self-administered semi-structured questionnaire included three sections:

I- Demographic and occupational data (age, gender, education , marital status workplace: university hospital or ministry of health (MOH) hospital, duration of work, current private lab work, history of Hepatitis B virus vaccine, type and severity of occupational health hazards) .

II- Data about Knowledge of occupational hazards, pattern of exposure, and preventive measures (8 items: 1. I have information about occupational health, 2. I am aware of the occupational hazards at work, 3.I know how to avoid occupational hazards, 4. I know about preventive measures to be taken at work, 5. I know what hazards I am being exposed to, 6. I know how I may be affected, 7. I know what I have to do to keep myself and others safe, 8.I know how to check and spot when something goes wrong, and to whom I will report any problems) (Alqam, 2013)

III-Questions related to the Practice of safety measures of the employees. Safety measures are adapted from OSHA guidelines for occupational health and safety (8 items: (OSHA, 2011). Safety measures are divided to 4 domains; general administrative measures (1 item: Access to the

laboratory to authorized personnel only), personal protection (7 items: 1. Lab coveralls, gowns worn all the time during lab work, 2. Wear appropriate gloves when required, 3. Wash their hands after handling infectious material or before leaving lab work, 4. Safety glasses or face shields to protect from splash, 5. Wear mask, 6. Wear special shoes, 7. Eating, drinking and smoking are prohibited in lab work areas), standard procedures (3 items: 1. Mouth pipetting is prohibited, 2. Doing all processes with least fumes or splashes or aerosol and 3. Incident reporting for splash/ spills injuries to lab supervisor), lab work area (5 items: 1. The lab should be kept neat clean free of the material not pertinent to work, 2. Work surfaces must be decontaminated after spill and at end of working day, 3. All contaminated materials, specimen, bacterial cultures are disinfected in autoclaves before disposal or cleaning for reuse, 4. Sharp containers used and disposed of properly and 5. The disinfectant used is appropriate and its efficacy ensured). Each item is evaluated using Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree (1 to 5). The cutoff point for adequate levels was set at 4 for all assertions in each domain. The cutoff for knowledge of occupational hazards was 32.

General administrative measures, personal protection, standard operating procedures, and lab work area all had cutoff points of 4, 28, 12, and 20; respectively. The projected cutoff points were determined by adding the agree and strongly agree responses to all items and assigning a good score.

Ethical Approval

The protocol was approved from the Institutional Research Board (IRB) from Mansoura faculty of Medicine (No: R.22.03.1636).

Consent

Verbal consent was taken from the administration of Technical Institute of Health and from all the studied subjects. The participation was voluntary, and all participants received guarantees about the privacy and anonymity of the data.

Data Management

Data were analyzed using by Social Package for Science Statistical Program v 22 (SPSS Incl., Chicago, IL, US). Quantitative variables were described in means and SDs as well as medians and minimum to maximum. Qualitative variables were described in numbers and percent. Chi-squared test was utilized for categorical variables. Binary forward wald logistic regression analysis was

utilized to determine the independent predictors of knowledge and practice as the dichotomous outcome variable. Variable with statistical significance in bivariate analysis were entered

into the logistic regression analysis. Adjusted odds ratios and their 95% CIs underwent calculation. A p value ≤ 0.05 was statistically significant

Results

Table (1): Occupational health knowledge and practice of safety measures among studied lab technicians.

	Average scores		Levels	
	Mean (SD)	Min-max	Good	Bad
			No (%)	No (%)
Knowledge of occupational hazards (8 items)	30.8 (6.4)	16-40	84 (47.2)	94 (52.8)
Safety measures				
General administrative measures (1 item)	4.06 (0.7)	2-5	137 (77)	23(41)
Personal protection (7 items)	29.7 (3.6)	21-35	127(71.3)	51(28.7)
Standard procedures (3 items)	12.2 (2.09)	6-15	105 (59)	73(41)
Lab work area (5 items)	21.02 (2.4)	15-25	129 (72.5)	49(27.5)

NB: Level of knowledge and safety was estimated according to certain cutoff points

The mean score for occupational health knowledge was 30.8. Less than half of studied lab technicians have good knowledge (47.2%). The mean (SD) score for general measures, personal protection, standard procedures and safe lab work area are 4.06 (0.7%), 29.7 (3.6%), 12.2 (2.09%), 21.02(2.4%); respectively). Most of them have high levels for safety measures including general administrative measures, personal protection, standard procedures and lab work area (77%, 71.3%, 59%, and 72.5%; respectively) (Table 1).

The mean age of studied group is 35.7 and near half of them (48.9%) are males. About two thirds (62.9%) received Hepatitis B vaccine. Most of them (80.3%) are diploma holders and work in university hospitals (79.2%). About two thirds of them have worked for less than 15 years (58.4%) (Results are not tabulated).

Table (2): Factors associated with good knowledge of occupational health hazards, pattern of exposure and prevention.

	Total	Knowledge score	Test of significance χ^2	Adjusted OR (95% CI)
		Good (≥ 32) No (%)		
Overall	No =178[#]	No =84 (47.2%)^{##}		
Age <35 (r) >35	105(59) 73 (41)	32 (30.5) 52(71.2)	28.7 p<0.001*	3.8 (1.9-7.7)
Gender Male Female (r)	87(48.9) 91(51.1)	54(62.1) 30(33)	15.1 p<0.001*	-----
Education Diploma (r) Specialty training	143(80.3) 35 (19.7)	54(37.8) 30(85.7)	25.9 p<0.001*	5.9 (2.06-17.02)
Type of hospital MOH (r) University hospital	141(79.2) 37(20.8)	64(45.4) 20(54.1)	0.8 p=0.3	-----
Duration of employment <15 years (r) ≥ 15 years	104(58.4) 74(41.6)	32(30.8) 52(70.3)	27.07 p<0.001*	-----

[#]: Column percent is considered ^{##}: Row percent is considered AOR: Adjusted odds ratio

r: reference group

* statistically significant.

There was a statistically significant difference in occupational health knowledge according to age, gender, education and employment duration ($p < 0.05$). The higher knowledge scores were present among the older age group (≥ 35 years), males, specialty trained workers and senior workers. In addition, older age group (≥ 35 years); AOR (95%CI): 3.8 (1.9-7.7) and better education in the form of specialty training AOR (95%CI): 5.9(2.06-17.02) showed increased chance of good knowledge (Table 2)

Table (3): Factors associated with good practice of lab occupational health and safety.

	Total	General measures	Lab work area	Work Procedures	Personal protection
	No (%)	Good (≥4) No (%)	Good (≥20) No (%)	Good (≥12) No (%)	Good (≥28) No (%)
Overall	No=178#	137 (76.9%)	129(72.4%)	105(58.9%)	127(71.3%)
Age					
<35 (r)	105(59)	74(70.5)	68(64.8)	48(45.7)	62(59)
≥35	73 (41)	63(86.3)	61(83.6)	57(78.1)	65(89)
Test of sig		p=0.01*	p=0.006*	p<0.001*	p<0.001*
Sex					
Male	87(48.9)	72(82.8)	64(73.6)	65(74.7)	71(81.6)
Female	91(51.1)	65(71.4)	65(71.4)	40(44.0)	56(61.5)
Test of sig		p=0.07	p=0.7	p<0.001*	p=0.003
Education					
Diploma (r)	143(80.3)	31(88.6)	33(94.3)	30(85.7)	34(97.1)
Specialty training	35 (19.7)	106(74.1)	96(67.1)	75(52.4)	93(65.0)
p value		p=0.06	p=0.001*	p<0.001*	p<0.001*
Type of hospital					
MOH	141(79.2)	105(74.)	100(70.9)	76(53.9)	98(69.5)
University hospital	37(20.8)	32(86.5)	29(78.4)	29(78.4)	29(78.4)
p value		p=0.1	p=0.3	p=0.007*	p=0.2
Duration of employment					
<15 years (r)	58.4))104	73(70.2)	68(65.4)	47(45.2)	61(58.7)
≥ 15 years	74(41.6)	64(86.5)	61(82.4)	58(78.4)	66(89.2)
p value		p=0.01*	p=0.01*	p<0.001*	p<0.001*
T.Knowledge score					
Bad (r)	94 (52.8)	61(64.9)	55(58.5)	36(38.3)	53(56.4)
Good	84 (47.2)	76(90.9)	74(88.1)	69(82.1)	74(88.1)
p value	$\chi^2=16.4$	p<0.001*	p<0.001*	p<0.001*	p<0.001*

#: Column percent is considered MOH: Ministry of health & population r: reference group

T. Knowledge: Total knowledge score * statistically significant.

As regards factors associated with good safety practice, there are significant difference in the general measures according to age and knowledge state ($p < 0.05$). Lab work areas, work procedures and personal protection are significantly different according to age, education, duration of employment and knowledge state ($p < 0.05$) (Table3) .

Table (4): Significant independent predictors of Lab safety practice among studied lab technicians.

	General measures	Lab work area	Work Procedures	Personal protection
	OR (95% CI)	OR (95% CI)	OR (95% CI)	OR (95% CI)
Sex Male Female (r)			2.4 (1.2-5.0)	
Education Diploma (r) Specialty training	--	4.3 (0.9-20.1)	----	7.0 (0.8-56.0)
Type of hospital MOH (r) University hospital	--		3.0 (1.2- 8.02)	
Duration of employment <15 years (r) ≥ 15 years	--		2.2(1.0-4.7)	3.06(1.2-7.4)
Knowledge Bad (r) Good	5.1(2.2-11.9)	3.9(1.7-8.7)	5.0(2.3-10.7)	3.1(1.4-7.1)

MOH: Ministry of health & population

r: reference group

OR: Odds ratio

According to logistic regression analysis, good knowledge (≥ 32) increases the chance for good safety practice across all domains, general measures, lab work areas, work procedures and personal protection ($p < 0.05$): AOR (95%CI: 5.1(2.2-11.9), 3.9(1.7-8.7), 5.0(2.3-10.7), 3.1(1.4-7.1); respectively. In addition, being a male, higher education and longer duration of employment (≥ 15 years) has affected significantly the practice of standard work procedures ($p < 0.05$): AOR: 2.4 (1.2-5.0), 3.0 (1.2- 8.02), 2.2(1.0-4.7); respectively. Lastly, personal protection is significantly affected by duration of employment ($p < 0.05$) (AOR (95%CI):3.06(1.2-7.4) (Table 4).

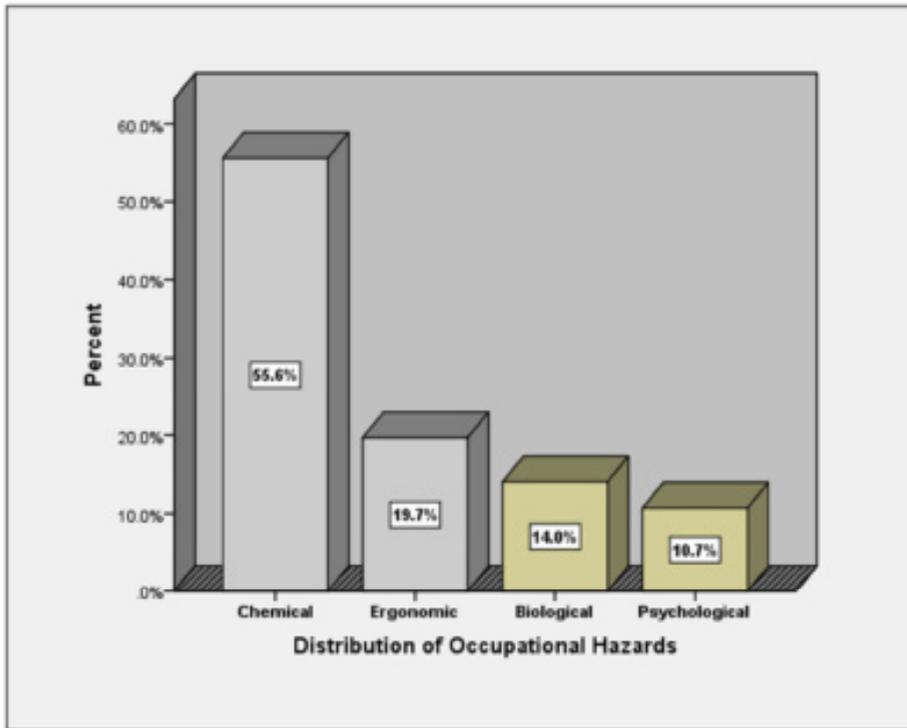


Figure (1): Distribution of occupational hazards among the studied lab technicians

The most frequently reported occupational hazards were chemical hazards (55.6%) followed by ergonomic hazards (19.7%) and biological hazards (14%) (Figure 1).

The most frequently reported occupational hazards of moderate severity is chemical hazards (31.5%) followed by biological hazards (24.2%). Also, the most frequently reported as severe hazards are chemical hazards (38.2%) followed by biological hazards (5.6%) (Results are not tabulated).

The hazards were classified as moderate or severe according to self-reported subjective classification based on Likert scale (from 1-5)

Discussion

Medical laboratory is considered potentially as hazardous workplace. Lab staff are exposed to many biological hazards in addition to physical and chemical incidents. Despite that the laboratory employees had some knowledge about safety measures in workplace, there were obvious disparities in their attitudes and practices.

The mean age of the studied group was 35.7 (9.0) and more than half of them (51.1%) were female. Regarding years of experience; about two third of workers had worked for < 15 years (58.4%) (Table 2). This finding was in line with Mahmoud and Sabry (2019), who revealed that > 50% of the laboratory workers in governmental hospitals in Benha City aged 30-40 years. As regards gender the finding was not in line with the same reference who revealed that more than two third of laboratory workers were males.

However, these findings were in accordance with Abode (2013); who studied profession hazards related to medical laboratories in Libya and found that approximately two thirds of them were females, and the majority had < 10 years of experience.

About 80% of the studied laboratory workers are diploma holders and work in university hospitals (79.2%) (Table 2). These findings support a study done by Awad (2017) that indicated that more than 50% of the sample had secondary education while the rest (less than 50%) had a high education or a postgraduate degree. Similarly, a comparable research from Kenya reported that most of participants had at least a diploma level of education (78.43%) (Misra et al., 2001).

About 62 % of the studied lab technicians were vaccinated against hepatitis B (results are not tabulated), which is similar to what was detected by Fateen et al. (2021) who found that 50.4% of the pathology allied health staff in the children's hospital; Lahore, India was vaccinated.

The mean score for occupational health knowledge among the studied postgraduate laboratory technician students was 30.8; less than half had good knowledge (47.2%) (Table 1). In a related study in Ahmedabad city in India, Zaveri (2012), detected that knowledge, attitude, perception, and compliance among laboratory workers were poor, only 20.8% of them had positive knowledge.

The current study results showed good occupational safety practices in laboratories (Table3). In consistence with our findings, a study that was carried out to evaluate the knowledge and practices of laboratory standard precautions (LSP) in Yemen and found that 38% of workers had good knowledge of LSP and 32% of them had good practice of LSP (Al-Abhar et al., 2017).

There were a statistically significantly difference in occupational health knowledge scores among the studied group as regards to age, gender, education and employment duration ($p < 0.05$). The higher knowledge scores was noticed among the older age group (≥ 35 years), males, master degree workers and senior workers (≥ 15 years) (Table 2). In agreement with these results Mahmoud and Sabry (2019) assessed quality of laboratory in microbiology laboratories of 4 Ministry of Health-related hospitals in Alexandria and reported high statistically significant differences between the total knowledge scores of laboratory employees in terms of age, sex, education level, job nature, experience years, and history of training programs ($p < 0.001$). The present findings also were in harmony with

Zenhom et al. (2012) from Alexandria , Egypt, who reported that the years of experience and training courses had significant effects on the level of knowledge among laboratory workers, where workers who worked for more than 10 years' experience and with training courses had best test results and performance level.

Lab safety practice scores were significantly higher among the studied group as regards age (< 35 and ≥ 35 years) including general measures, lab work area, work procedures and personal protection with noticed better practice in older age group ($p < 0.05$). In addition, there are higher practice scores among males compared to females with statically significant difference ($p < 0.05$). There has been significantly higher lab safety practice among workers ≥ 15 years than the < 15 years ($p < 0.05$) duration of employment (Table 3). This could be due that males need to be aware about safety procedures because they are more prevalent in technical positions and work in private laboratories. Females, on the other hand, might tend to take some time off, such as maternity leave, and don't necessarily work full time. They therefore possess less experience

than men. These results disagree with a Malaysian study which reported that women had better knowledge, attitudes and practices about work related hazards and therefore are less susceptible to work related harm (Netto and Rahmawati, 2017).

Higher education and good knowledge were significant predictors for good practice among the studied group (Table 4). Similarly, a study in Yemen which agreed on the observation that higher education is linked to better knowledge and practices and explained their findings by better opportunities to learn about the biosafety (Al-Abhar et al., 2017).

However, another study from Saudi Arabia reported that sex, education level and years of experience did not reveal significant association with safety practices among laboratory workers. The mean score was greater among females compared to males (Thirunavukkarasu et al., 2021). Alshalani and Salama, 2019 in their study on assessment of occupational safety practices among medical laboratory staff in governmental hospitals in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia noticed that positive score improved by increase in years of experience and education level

Chemical hazards were the most often reported occupational risks (55.6%), followed by ergonomic risks (19.7%) and biological risks (14%) among the studied group (Figure 1). These results came in agreement with a study done in Italy on research lab workers and found that 54.4% of them were exposed to chemical hazards (Papadopoli et al., 2020).

Also these results were consistent with a study on Scientific Laboratory Workers of the Public University in Lebanon (No = 220) which reported that 45.0% have had accidents; the main cause was exposure to chemicals (73.7%) and more specifically by inhalation (45.4%). Females (85.9%) were more exposed to accidents than males (Nasrallah et al., 2022).

Regarding occupational hazard severity, the most frequently reported one of moderate severity was chemical hazards (31.5%) followed by biological hazards (24.2%). Also, the most frequently reported as severe hazards were chemical hazards (38.2%) followed by biological hazards (5.6%) (Results are not tabulated).

Alqam (2013) from Al-Quds University, Palestine in his study on occupational hazards among laboratory

workers in Palestinian governmental hospitals reported that the biologic and chemical hazards were the most severe occupational hazards faced by the participants. Authors explained that because of the nature of the laboratory works. The lowest percent were for ergonomic and psychological hazards.

Study Limitations: The current study was conducted in a single institute on a small scale. Large-scale studies are therefore required on a nationwide level to determine the rates of adherence to safety precautions and pinpoint potential occupational health risks among laboratory personnel. An observation checklist must be included to record the types, severity, and patterns of lab workers' exposure.

Conclusion

Less than 50% of studied laboratory technician had adequate knowledge towards occupational health and safety measures. There was significant association between knowledge of occupational health safety measures and age, education and duration of employment. Also, knowledge and education were significant predictors for good safety practice.

Recommendations

The laboratory staff should receive regular training on laboratory safety. Hospitals should set up an effective, active, and well-implemented occupational safety programs under the supervision of safety officers. The curriculum course involving safety awareness and preventive measures needs to be intensified in national technical institutes. Applying administrative and engineering controls in a laboratory environment can significantly reduce ergonomic hazards. Chemical hazard assessment is required to implement safety measures according to hazardous chemical exposure. Safety plans can be tailored according to each lab based on risk assessment. Adequate training in the management of accidents and first aid for hazardous chemicals is required.

Conflict of interest

None

Funding

None

Acknowledgements

The authors are thankful to all health-care workers who participated in this study.

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