



## What's Work Got To Do With Total Worker Health®?

**Guest:** Dr. Casey Chosewood, M.D., M.P.H

**Host:** Helen Schuckers, M.P.H.

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:** [00:00](#)

For me it comes down to this, work is so, so very influential to our overall health and well-being, and because of this we must really work diligently to improve the quality of work.

**Helen Schuckers:** [00:17](#)

Have you ever noticed that exercise is the last thing on your mind after a long day at work, or that it's hard to go to bed after a stressful workday? How does a work injury impact your wellbeing at home? How safely can you operate that forklift if you're feeling ill? How productive would it be at work if you're worried about your child's first day at school? Research shows that when a workplace builds programs to reduce accidents at work and keep their employees healthy and well, they're likely to have better outcomes in safety, health and wellbeing.

**Helen Schuckers:** [00:47](#)

This is the idea of Total Worker Health®. Total Worker Health® is a workplace approach that addresses both occupational safety and health and employee wellbeing in one holistic integrated effort. So how does this work? Our guest today is Dr. Casey Chosewood. Doctor Chosewood is the Director of the Office for Total Worker Health at the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, or NIOSH. His office led numerous CDC workforce protection programs, including all occupational health services, laboratory and bio safety programs, environmental and compliance activities, and workplace wellbeing and prevention initiatives. Before this Dr. Chosewood was the medical director for the Southeastern Region of Lucent Technologies.

**Helen Schuckers:** [01:29](#)

He served as a medical director of the CDC's three occupational health clinics. Dr. Chosewood received his medical degree at the Medical College of Georgia, completed his residency in family medicine at the University of Connecticut and received an MPH in health policy and management from Emory University's Rollins School of Public Health. Dr. Chosewood will talk to us today about total worker health and how implementing this important strategy can improve the safety, health and wellbeing

of workers. Thank you for joining us today on the phone Dr. Chosewood. It's so great to have you today as a guest.

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:** [02:04](#)

Thanks very much for having me, it's great to be with you all.

**Helen Schuckers:** [02:06](#)

We just wanted to begin by sharing what your current role is as the Director of the office for Total Worker Health at NIOSH. And then maybe we can dive into more of the ideas of where Total Worker Health came from, and why is this concept important in our workplace today?

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:** [02:21](#)

Sure. I lead a team in NIOSH that's dedicated to improving the health, safety and wellbeing of workers both on and off the job. Since 2009 NIOSH has really advocated for a comprehensive, integrated approach to worker's safety and health. And we're really focused on organizations and how we can help them really achieve this approach that we've called Total Worker Health. When done correctly and respectfully, interventions that are focused on improving the health of workers can both improve worker's lives and really an organization's bottom line.

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:** [02:59](#)

We specifically define Total Worker Health® as policies, practices and programs that integrate protection from work related safety and health hazards with the promotion of injury and illness prevention efforts. All really designed to advance worker wellbeing at the end of the day. So really simply put, organizations first must protect workers and then take a step further by introducing those three P's, policies, practices and programs that really can advance the health of workers on and off the job. The result if done well, can really lead workers to obtain these high levels of well-being that we're most interested in. And this directly benefits workers, and by extension positively affects the organizations in which they work.

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:** [03:51](#)

Traditional occupational safety and health protection programs have primarily concentrated on insuring that work is safe and that workers are protected from the harms that arise from the work itself. But the total worker health approach builds upon this and it recognizes that work in it of itself is a social determinant of health. Job related factors such as wages, hours of work, the workload, how much autonomy workers have, their stress levels, even their interactions with coworkers and supervisors, their access to paid leave and their access to health promoting built environments and other environmental elements of the workplace. All of those things can have a very important impact on the wellbeing of workers, and on their

families and their communities. So that in a nutshell is really what we're about in Total Worker Health.

**Helen Schuckers:** [04:45](#)

Thanks Casey. Total Worker Health does seem intuitive but also requires organizations to really think about each component of safety, health and wellbeing. With the growing evidence of Total Worker Health and the approach in bringing the positive impact to an organization, it's really not as prevalent in the workplace as it should be. And I understand that it's difficult within an organization hone in on. What are some practical challenges of implementing total worker health and some solutions that you can share with our listeners?

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:** [05:14](#)

Yeah, I think that's an excellent question. And there are a number of approaches that can be taken to overcome some of these challenges. From small organizations to large, each can have some barriers that might make it more difficult to address health and safety among workers as comprehensively as we would like. Or there can be limits. If you don't have good, strong leadership support on board to champion some of these programs and move them forward. I think it's vital that we work hard to really look at some of these traditional and more risky jobs and occupations and industries and think about the best way to make them safer for workers.

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:** [05:55](#)

When we talk about making jobs safer, we're getting rid of some of the underlying traditional risks that workers face. I think it's important for us to where it's possible to really eliminate those working conditions that threaten the safety, the health, the wellbeing of workers. Now in some industries that's much easier than others. A good example could be truck drivers. They really suffer from high rates of obesity because of the sedentary nature of their job. The shifts involve long hours of work.

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:** [06:25](#)

The lack of access to healthy foods for example. All of those things really drive that job into having obesity as an unfortunate take home benefit. About 70 to 80%, much, much higher than the average worker. Now if you can eliminate the workplace conditions that are causing those truck drivers to have such high rates of obesity, that would be ideal. And in truth, there's some interventions to move to driverless transportation options. Or to have this sort of semi-autonomous driving where truck drivers do part of the controls let's say in a busy city, but on long, straight or safer highways, the truck drives itself, allowing workers to do other things.

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:** [07:08](#)

If all of the hazards though can't be eliminated completely, then it could be important for us to train workers to give them more interventions that improve other aspects of their health and wellbeing. Give them more awareness, better screenings, earlier detection for underlying conditions. Those are all helpful. Encouraging workers to make better choices. Those are helpful. But they're not as powerful as eliminating underlying working threats themselves, or substituting in better health enhancing policies, programs and practices. Those are really the more fundamental basic ways of healthier work design that really lead to the best outcomes in the long-term. Fortunately, NIOSH has a wide range of resources, a wide range of tools to assist organizations really of all sizes in building a successful total worker health program.

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:** [08:07](#)

All our resources from NIOSH are available free of charge. And many of our centers of excellence also offer really high quality evidence-based programs that are available for the public to use that are also free of charge. And I think it's important for organizations to know that even small steps can start them on the path toward a safer and healthier workforce. You don't have to do everything all at once on day one. You can introduce small components of total worker health and then do more each and every month or year that follows.

**Helen Schuckers:** [08:42](#)

So when I'm out in the community meeting with different organizations, I get asked the question a lot, how can I make the business case for total worker health? Organizations, oftentimes they ask me, and want to see the numbers. The return on investment, what is the time commitment, and how they can save dollars. And a lot of these organizations, they really do care about their employees, but they also have to meet the bottom line for their cost effectiveness. Can you speak more about that?

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:** [09:07](#)

Lots of organizations are really motivated to intervene around the health and safety to save money. And we're okay with that because we do believe that there are savings that can be found in using the total worker health approach. But our experience has been that healthcare cost savings are not the sole motivation to adopt total worker health policies and programs. Often even in spite of some costs associated with implementing the program, employers regularly tell us that they accrue competitive advantages related to recruitment, retention, employee satisfaction, community engagement and reputation.

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:** [09:49](#)

They also talk a lot to us about developing a culture where their workers thrive. One that sees and recognizes their contributions to the workplace. Where workers feel empowered to bring their best effort forward in the workplace. These are advantages that our research shows are available through the total worker health approach. We also see evidence that there can be cost saving early on oftentimes by using this approach in the occupational injury and illness space. So, some of the earliest cost savings for programs that put in place the total worker health approach is decreased numbers of injury and illness from an occupational standpoint that can decrease worker's compensation costs. It can shorten the length of time that people are away from work if they become ill or injured. I also mention a few promising practices, programs and policies that others have taken advantage of. And I want to share just a few of those with you. Some of our research shows that offering paid sick leave for instance for employees may help reduce the prevalence of illness and injury on the job. And that can reduce the economic burden of your organization. So, it's research like this that really make the case that offering programs and practices that are worker centered can lead to benefits for the organization.

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:** [11:14](#)

We know that providing training for supervisors on total worker health approaches, especially around reducing stressful working conditions can improve employee health, can reduce turnover and increase employee retention. Another good example that I'm really fond of because I'm using one of these right now is providing a walking work station or a sit/stand work station. Or implementing active meetings. There's good evidence to show that these promote health and lower the risk for chronic disease among workers. And that can reduce absenteeism and presentism.

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:** [11:48](#)

We also know that attention to designing and providing ergonomically friendly work environments can promote productive aging and support a healthier, safer, more age friendly workforce, something very important to organizations that are really interested in keeping workers on into their 50's, 60's and 70's. And then lastly, I'll just mention that there are a number of organizational and management policies that give workers more flexibility and control over their work schedules day in and day out.

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:** [12:21](#)

And these interventions we know can remove impediments to wellbeing. And lead to healthier, more productive workers. We go into quite a bit of detail in these and other promising

practices on our website. And I would really love for your listeners to take a look at our website.

**Helen Schuckers:** [12:39](#)

Thank you so much for sharing that Casey. And as a NIOSH total worker health center of excellence, a lot of our interventions do touch on health promotion, the supervisor support and training, ergonomics in the workplace and having that multi-component change in the workplace and to implement programs. So those were great examples. But as a society as a whole, we're seeing the times are changing. Technology is changing the way we work and even how we work. So, in terms of total worker health, how does this play into the evolution of what work is going towards and what are some pressing total worker health issues in today's work? Whether it be from contract temporary workers or the aging workforce?

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:** [13:21](#)

That's an excellent question. Much of the world as you mentioned is focused really on how work and our work lives are changing. And some of that really keys in on all the new technologies that we experience through our lives as workers. And there's no doubt about it that technology is rapidly changing. It's evolving the way we were. It's certainly going to make many traditional jobs and traditional challenges obsolete. But it's not going to happen overnight. And many, many workers out there will continue to have traditional jobs or stay in their current job for many years to come.

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:** [13:55](#)

Maybe for the rest of their careers. And unfortunately, many of these traditional jobs still carry risks. So, while we do focus a lot on the future of work and the changing nature of work, we also want to still pay attention to those legacy, traditional, ongoing hazards that are likely to be exposing workers to physical, chemical hazards, violence, punishing schedules, low wages, low hours, that sort of thing for many years to come. So, we continue to need to focus on both new and emerging challenges as well as some of these traditional ones. For instance, we know that work associated stress has been a longstanding problem in many occupations.

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:** [14:33](#)

And as work evolve at a more rapid pace than before, workplace associated stress is likely to continue to grow. So, we need now research in that area. We need new interventions in that space. And as you mentioned, the new economy is also making many, many jobs less secure than they were before. With fewer built in benefits and protection, we know there's been a rise in nonstandard employment. And the uncertainty of work and interrupted or part time work can lead to a reduction

in earnings over a working lifespan. Many temporary jobs lack the benefits that come from traditional employment.

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:** [15:11](#)

Like paid leave, or illness or family challenges. Many current jobs that are on the market now do not offer pensions or retirement security for instance. We also see negative consequences for the worker in society after injury in these settings where they don't have traditional employment. The risk for severity of injury, and the likelihood of disability is oftentimes elevated, especially in those jobs where there's not adequate training or some of the protections like personal protective equipment are not provided or not updated regularly. And we know that return to work after injury or illness may also be more challenging in these settings that don't have the traditional protections build in.

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:** [15:57](#)

We're also understanding the link between work and chronic disease better than ever before. For instance, we know that shift work has been associated with elevated risk for cancer, for heart disease, for diabetes, for obesity, for the risk of violence and for stroke severity. And many occupations have much higher rates of obesity, cancer or heart disease than other occupations do. That's a strong indictment. There's something about the job itself needs to be made safer and better and more healthy. These differences really send a strong message that we must take the right steps to improve work.

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:** [16:35](#)

It needs to be better constructed to be safer and better designed to engineer out some of those existing underlying threats. We must also do a better job really of surveillance in this area so we more clearly understand the connection between work and health conditions, especially those that arise more slowly over time like chronic diseases.

**Helen Schuckers:** [16:56](#)

Yeah, a lot of these problems are very common in any industry as a whole. And it also reminds me, I remember your talk at our last summer institute for our center where you talk about the gig economy and how that's becoming a more prevalent area of people working in isolated environment that might not necessarily have the social support and things like that.

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:** [17:17](#)

Right, good point.

**Helen Schuckers:** [17:19](#)

So NIOSH funds a lot of these total worker health centers of excellence. There's six total. Much like the Oregon Healthy Work [inaudible 00:17:26] Center here. And is there kind of a goal to grow that research on total worker health? And also encourage it into practice?

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:** [17:35](#)

Yeah, thanks Helen. I really would love to take the opportunity to talk a bit more about our total worker health centers of excellence and our total worker health resilient program. As you mentioned NIOSH funds six centers of excellence across the country including your own, the Oregon Healthy Workforce Center. And these centers are funded to do total worker health research, and dissemination of their learning. And I'm extremely pleased with the productivity and how active all our centers are in producing really high quality outputs.

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:** [18:11](#)

The centers really developed what I would say are some of the most cutting edge interventions in the whole space of workplace safety, health, especially the integration of prevention and protection of workers. But they do more than just produce research. They all develop excellent tools, resources, practices, and approaches that organizations can actually put in place. So, we're really moving beyond just the bench research and the hard science into those spaces where people can take action today.

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:** [18:46](#)

And first of all you can visit our own website to learn about the six interests. But I would also invite you to visit each of the six centers individual websites to take a look at the wealth of really evidence-based novel research and practice opportunities that they've been developing. The total worker health affiliate program is a bit different. These are not funded by NIOSH. These are volunteer really alliances that we've developed to really foster an integrated approach to protecting and promoting worker wellbeing through collaboration. And these have largely been through academic organizations, other universities that are not funded by NIOSH.

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:** [19:29](#)

Labor organizations, so a good example is the relationship with a communication workers of America or the labor occupational health program. Or the international brotherhood of boilermakers are just some of our labor partners. We also partner with nonprofit and employer organizations. For instance, the National Safety Council or the American Occupational Health Nurses Association. And similar government organizations such as federal, state and local government agencies. And the affiliate program really is all about collaboration.

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:** [20:01](#)

So it's bringing together those folks who can really be test beds if you will for total worker health intervention so that we can learn from them. And they can benefit from the research from our own programs here at NIOSH and our centers of excellence. We hope to increase the visibility and uptake of important total

worker health science through these partnerships. We hope to attract and assist new collaborators to really broaden our understanding of how these programs can work in the field. We also help attract a new interest in the total worker field as a whole. We are developing a number of certificate programs and degree programs related to total worker health.

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:** [20:42](#)

What kind of skills do practitioners of the future need if they're going to be able to assist organizations? Lead total worker health interventions, lead safety programs of tomorrow that really integrate the full wellbeing and the healthier work design concept that really is at the heart of total worker health. We also use the affiliate program to recognize the contributions of our partners who are really developing and disseminating high quality research and practice. So, as I mentioned, potential affiliates, and we're always interested in more could include academic institutions, labor organizations, nonprofit associations related to health and occupational safety, public sector entities and other similar organizations.

**Helen Schuckers:** [21:27](#)

Casey, I just wanted to ask, is there a review process that an organization can go online and apply on the NIOSH website for the affiliate program?

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:** [21:34](#)

It is a fairly easy process to get started. If you want to just Google total worker health affiliates, you're going to be taken directly to our website that not only lists the more than 40 current affiliates, but it gives examples of how NIOSH and the affiliates are working together, oftentimes in collaboration with our centers of excellence to move the effort forward. And it's quite easy for folks to get the ball rolling. So, there will be quite a bit of information on the website itself. But for those interested organizations, we'd invite them to send us a note on the affiliate's webpage and we'll set up a call. And we'll talk about opportunities to work more closely together. So, thank you for the opportunity for us to get the word out about our [inaudible 00:22:18].

**Helen Schuckers:** [22:18](#)

Yeah. No, I think that's one component that a lot of people that we've been in touch with, there is that resource out there and that opportunity and [inaudible 00:22:26] very helpful. Our final question, what would you leave our listeners with in terms of a takeaway about total worker health? What is kind of that golden nugget that you can advocate for in this concept?

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:** [22:40](#)

Absolutely. For me it comes down to this, work is so, so very influential to our overall health and wellbeing. And because of this, we must really work diligently to improve the quality of

work. It controls so many elements of our daily life, our responsibilities, our demands, our schedule. Even to include the time we have for sleep, for physical activity, for eating better, for getting enough rest. Work really is in charge of so many of those elements. Work obviously influences important educational decisions and marriage and family decisions. And retirement decisions. Heck, it even often determines where we live.

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:** [23:19](#)

Work can also really enhance or diminish our opportunities for a meaningful and healthy relationship. So, because of this, because work influences critical choices around all of these things, it really matters. And it's really important to so many facets of our lives. That's why we believe that we must really work hard to optimize the quality of jobs that are available out there. For ourselves and generations to come, that's why I love this work so much. I think it's extremely important for the health of individual workers, our families and our nation as a whole. So, I just want to say thank you guys for all you're doing at the Oregon Healthy Workforce Center to move the program forward.

**Helen Schuckers:** [24:05](#)

Thank you for joining us today Dr. Chosewood. And sharing with our listeners the important work that's being done through NIOSH total worker health. And I'm sure the listeners can take away at least one component to help them start in total worker health and even just embracing that altogether.

**Dr. Casey Chosewood:** [24:21](#)

Great. It's been my pleasure to be with you today. I really enjoyed our conversation.

**Helen Schuckers:** [24:25](#)

You're listening to what's work got to do with it? You go to resource on all things workplace safety, health and wellbeing. This has been an episode of our podcast series where we invite you into the conversation as we discuss how our workplace conditions like work hours, occupational stress, job safety, and other issues affect our lives at home and at work. We go into the science behind it all and talk about what we can do to reduce work related risk and promote wellbeing. Thanks for joining us. This podcast is a production of the Oregon Institute of Occupational Health Sciences. And it's hosted and directed by Helen Schuckers, Sam Greenspan and Anjali Rameshbabu.

**Helen Schuckers:**

[25:06](#)

Our mission at the Oregon Institute of Occupational Health Sciences is to improve the lives of workers through biomedical and occupational research. Home to over 75 scientists and research staff, the institute explores a range of questions related to the prevention of work related injury and disease, and promotion of health in the workplace. Do you have an idea for a podcast episode? We want to hear from you on important workplace issues that you would like to discuss. Email us at [ocealthsci@ohsu.edu](mailto:ocealthsci@ohsu.edu). Subscribe to the Oregon in the workplace blog or our social media channels at [Facebook.com/ocealthsci.ohsu](https://www.facebook.com/ocealthsci.ohsu). Or follow us on Twitter [@ohsuocchealth](https://twitter.com/ohsuocchealth) to stay updated on current research, resources, news and community events.

