

Wiesia Walicka, rooms-quality attendant for Delta Vancouver Suites, safely dusts one of the hotel rooms in her care.

Room for improvement

By Kathy Eccles



Working on a cleaning crew for the hospitality industry? Keep in mind your high-pressure job leaves you vulnerable to a myriad of sprains and strains.

Wiesia Walicka has been working almost 15 years as a rooms-quality attendant at the Delta Vancouver Suites Hotel. Her job is fast-paced and highly physical – enough to remind her firsthand of the risks she confronts daily.

One of the biggest challenges Walicka and other staff face is the need to work against the clock while cleaning rooms on a set schedule. If the hotel has a full house, they'll be performing 100 check-outs and 100 check-ins at a time – their work further complicated by late check-outs and patrons using “DNDs,” the Do Not Disturb signs that delay access to the rooms.

What's more, once room attendants such as Walicka finally do gain

access, rushing through their work is – unfortunately – not an option.

“To meet the hotel's high standards, we have to take our time and make sure the room is fresh and clean,” she says.

Fortunately, Walicka has yet to be injured on the job. She now trains new room attendants to ensure they, too, remain safe, as well as confident enough to ask for more health and safety instruction if they have questions.

But others, attracted to the industry by the glitz of working in a luxury resort or on a cruise ship, may discover that the environment is not as glamorous – or hazard-proof – as it seems.

“If you see something you’re worried about or start to feel pain, tell your employer. Get involved. An injury can be long-term.”

—WorkSafeBC hospitality and retail specialist Lorne Scarlett

Understand the risks of repetitive work

If you work as a room attendant in the hospitality industry, WorkSafeBC statistics show that you’re at high risk of a musculoskeletal injury. For room attendants, incidents involving overexertion or falls on the same level accounted for more than half of claim costs between 2007 and 2011. Strains – particularly back strains – accounted for nearly two-thirds of claim costs during that same period.

When looking at the physical demands of a room attendant’s job – squatting, reaching, bending, and twisting – it’s easy to see why claim costs are high.

A case study by the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety found that room attendants clean up to 16 rooms per shift, with 15 to 30 minutes allotted per room, depending on the room size and number of beds. The study shows that a room attendant changes body positions

every three seconds – approximately 8,000 times in an eight-hour shift.

WorkSafeBC senior ergonomist Peter Goyert says that lifting and turning mattresses is a huge issue, particularly when many hotels are meeting customer demands for what he calls, “enormous, king-sized mattresses.” This means attendants continuously conduct a high-risk lift of mattresses weighing up to 45 kg (100 lbs.) “Injuries can result from all of the cumulative lifting,” he says.

In addition to the range of strains and sprains associated with this job, it’s important to remember that room attendants are vulnerable to unhealthy exposures.

WorkSafeBC occupational safety officer Laddie MacKinnon cites such risks as exposure to body fluids and noxious cleaning chemicals, along with the danger of needle-stick injuries. He advocates wearing gloves at all times, and removing them only when handling clean linens.

Speak up about your safety concerns

Trina Wright, program manager for industry health and safety at go2 – B.C.’s human resource association for tourism – leads a technical advisory committee of about a dozen B.C. hotel representatives. This group is working to improve occupational health and safety practices in the industry.

Wright says the committee is encouraging employers to put a range of new injury prevention products into practice, ranging from extendable cleaning poles, pump-style spray bottles, and pillow-top mattresses (that don’t need turning) to motorized carts, self-propelled ergonomic vacuums, and a plastic mattress tool that automatically raises bed mattresses. A number of B.C. hotels have already begun using these products and practices with their staff.

Another member of the committee is Tety Partaatmadja, people resources director at Delta Vancouver Suites. She says the hotel has adapted a working alone policy that requires room attendants to keep the door closed while cleaning, and to refuse entry to anyone who knocks and is without a key.

In terms of ergonomic issues, WorkSafeBC hospitality and retail specialist Lorne Scarlett has also seen problems at smaller hotels and motels, where it’s common to see just two room attendants cleaning 30 to 35 rooms. “Typically,” he says, “these hotels or motels can be two stories high

with outside access, where the housekeepers have to run upstairs and downstairs carrying linens – many, many times.” Because of higher turnover at smaller hotels, “training and supervision is the most important thing.”

Scarlett advises employees to speak up if they’re having trouble: “If you see something you’re worried about or start to feel pain, tell your employer. Get involved. An injury can be long-term.”

Accommodate your physical limitations

WorkSafeBC new and young worker specialist Robin Schooley believes speaking out becomes even more imperative when workers are young or inexperienced and unfamiliar with the work. “There’s a whole newness factor. They don’t know what they don’t know.” Her advice to new and young workers is to keep in mind the right to request additional training, speak up about unsafe work, and refuse unsafe work.

In general, WorkSafeBC statistics indicate workers aged 45 to 54 accounted for nearly one-third of claim costs among hotel room attendants during the past five years. This might reflect the fact that, as MacKinnon observes; many of the larger hotels are able to retain long-service employees. “Ninety percent or more are older than 30; they enjoy their work and are loyal to their employers.”

Meanwhile, at the Delta Vancouver Suites, Walicka is grateful that the hotel’s new second-shift cleaning crew has lessened the effect of time crunches. “We start at 8 a.m. and now have another crew that starts at 10 a.m. to handle late check-outs. Or a supervisor will help us by stripping beds, taking the linens out, and removing the garbage.”

She regularly tells her fellow room attendants, “If you need more information, follow the program, watch the safety video, and use the tools provided by the hotel.”

For more information on injury and illness prevention for hotel room attendants, visit the go2 website at www.go2hr.ca/accomsafety. While many of the information guides on this site are

directed at employers, they contain useful tips and resources for reducing the likelihood of repetitive strain or other kinds of injuries most common among room attendants, they clarify employer and employee roles and responsibilities regarding injury prevention, and they outline basic processes to assist with returning to work quickly and safely after a workplace injury.

Steps to self-care for hotel room attendants

- Kneel or squat and do one side of the bed at a time.
- Use tools with long handles for hard-to-reach areas.
- Stand in the tub to scrub the walls and back of the tub.
- Use a step stool when changing shower curtains.
- Do not balance on the edge of the tub.
- Push rather than pull housekeeping carts.
- Report faulty carts to your supervisor.
- Pad your knees or change your position often when kneeling.
- Wear shoes with cushioning to relieve knee and back stress.
- Alternate arms when scrubbing, vacuuming, and tucking.
- Let muscles rest by pausing for five to 10 seconds.

—Adapted from *Preventing Injuries to Room Attendants*, part of WorkSafeBC’s series on Ergonomic Tips for the Hospitality Industry (www.worksafebc.com/publications/health_and_safety/by_topic/assets/pdf/roomattend.pdf.) 