Noise induced hearing loss (NIHL) is one of the most pervasive occupational health illnesses in the manufacturing industry. According to NIOSH, 16 million people work in the manufacturing sector, accounting for approximately 13% of the U.S. workforce. Bureau of Labor Statistics data show occupational hearing loss accounts for 1 in 9 recordable illnesses in the industry.

Eliminating noise exposure is the most effective method for reducing NIHL, but this is not always feasible. When that is the case, a high quality, effective hearing conservation program (HCP) can be a significant factor in preventing or at least minimizing NIHL in the workforce.

How does one ensure a high quality HCP? That is the mission of Council for Accreditation in Occupational Hearing Conservation (CAOHC). CAOHC is a professional organization dedicated to providing consumer safety and protection by offering credentialing to those working to prevent NIHL. It is overseen by a council that includes representatives from nine professional societies involved in occupational safety and hearing, including ASSE. Brent Charlton, CSP, and the author are the current ASSE representatives.

CAOHC provides credentialing in three areas of occupational hearing conservation:

- Certified Occupational Hearing Conservationist (COHC);
- Professional Supervisor of the Audiometric Monitoring Program (PS);
- Course Directors (CD).

Certified Occupational Hearing Conservationist (COHC) is the frontline individual who meets with the worker, performs preaudiometry ear inspections, provides air-conduction audiometric testing, conducts initial screening for problem audiograms for further professional review, administers training on audiometric testing and the adverse effects of noise, use/fitting/care of hearing protection, and may be involved in maintaining equipment and recordkeeping. The COHC certification, without further education and experience, is not expected to interpret audiograms, diagnose hearing disorders, conduct noise surveys or design noise engineering controls.

In a manufacturing facility, this individual may be the company nurse, safety director or a person directly involved with audiometric testing. Certification
requires attending a CAOHC-approved 20-hour course and passing a standardized examination. No other formal training or qualifications are required.

Professional Supervisor of the Audiometric Monitoring Program

The PS establishes and oversees the audiometric testing program ensuring that proper equipment, testing, training and recordkeeping protocols are developed and implemented. The PS oversees the COHC’s work, reviews audiograms, makes baseline comparisons and determines whether any confirmed threshold shift or hearing loss is work-related, based on audiometric, medical and noise exposure history. If so, the PS ensures that proper worker notification, follow-up and entries into management databases such as the OSHA 300 log occur.

In a manufacturing facility, this may be the staff physician, or an audiologist or otolaryngologist retained by the employer. Certification requires that the candidate hold a license in the practice of medicine or audiology, and has successfully completed a CAOHC-approved PS course and online examination.

Course Directors

CAOHC-approved courses are conducted by CAOHC-trained CDs. To ensure consistency and quality of the courses, CDs must have adequate professional and educational backgrounds and be certified by one of several different professional organizations (e.g., ABIH, BCSP, licensed physician, nurse or audiologist). They must also demonstrate a minimum of 1,000 hours devoted to occupational hearing conservation during the previous 5 years and complete an 8-hour CAOHC CD workshop or equivalent. CAOHC provides CDs with training resources, curriculum oversight and professional support to assist in ensuring high quality, standardized training for OHC.

This article presents only an overview of the qualifications and requirements. Prospective candidates should refer to the CAOHC website for a complete list of requirements and submissions.

CAOHC publications include The Hearing Conservation Manual, 5th edition. This manual is a comprehensive information source on all aspects of occupational hearing conservation, from the anatomy of the ear to understanding audiograms to worker training and motivation. The manual includes reference documents and information on industry-specific noise requirements such as MSHA 30 CFR Part 62, Federal Railroad Administration noise regulations 49 CFR 227 and 229, and the NIOSH Hearing Conservation Checklist. The Hearing Conservation Study Guide is designed to supplement the required COHC course and to assist candidates in their preparation for the exam. CAOHC also publishes a free online newsletter with short, interesting articles related to occupational hearing conservation. A recent edition discusses measurement of crowd noise at football games. Finally, CAOHC provides an online noise exposure assessment course to help those involved in hearing conservation better understand the actual exposure determination aspect of the program.

If your facility has a hearing conservation program that includes audiometric testing, certification by CAOHC may be worth investigating.

References


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The Monitor Resources

- Industrial Hygiene Information
- International Resource Guide
- Journal of SH&E Research
- Networking Opportunities
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