

**3M Transcript for the following interview: Ep 50 – Julia Norris, Who are the AIOH?**

Mark Reggers (R) Julia Norris (N)

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Welcome to the 3M Science of Safety podcast presented by 3M Australia and New Zealand Personal Safety Division. This is a podcast that is curious about the signs and systems of all things work, health and safety, that keep workers safe and protect their health. I am Mark Reggers, an occupational hygienist, who likes to ask the questions Why, How, and Please Explain. Whether you are a safety professional, occupational hygienist, or someone with any level of WHS responsibility in the workplace, maybe you are a user of safety products or maybe you are a bit of a safety nerd who finds this stuff really interesting, then this is a podcast for you.

Welcome to the 3M Science of Safety podcast everyone. I am Mark Reggers, an occupational hygienist, who likes to ask the questions Why, How, and Please Explain.

(R) Today we are talking about who are the AIOH. Now, I've done many episodes where we've referred to the AIOH, who are the Australian Institute of Occupational Hygienists, so I thought it's about time we actually spoke to someone from the AIOH about who they are and what they do, and that person is Julia Norris. Welcome, Julia.

(N) Thank you very much, Mark. Thank you for having me.

(R) Now, many hygienists who listen to this will know exactly who you are, but probably a lot of people who wouldn't know you are. So, Julia, can you please introduce yourself, who are you, where are you from and why are you the best person to speak to today about the AIOH?

(N) Absolutely. So, I am the best person to speak to about the Australian Institute of Occupational Hygienists because I am the 2019 president. I'll hold that office until December and I come from a background of occupational hygiene. I'm a certified occupational hygienist and have been for many years and started practising in occupational hygiene fairly fresh out of university in 1996. So, I think I've been a member since around about that time. So, I have a lot of history in the organisation, although it was around for a long time before me.

(R) We have referred to the AIOH and hinted about who they are. We've done an episode about Peter Aspinall about what is occupational hygiene. So, if you had to sum up who the AIOH are and what their objectives are, how would you put that to someone who knows nothing about the AIOH?

(N) Yeah, look, good question. The AIOH is a professional body, so we represent occupational hygienists in Australia and our vision really is for a healthy workplace for all. So, at the end of the day, that's what we're aiming for. And we're trying to achieve this by really promoting the knowledge, practice and standing of occupational health and hygiene professionals in Australia.

(R) So, you've been practising occupational hygiene since the late '90s, but how long has the AIOH been around because there's been workplaces for many years? So, when did they come into existence?

(N) The AIOH was actually founded in February 1980, so, we've been around for over 40 years. In 1987, it was one of the initial eight signatories to the agreement that formed the International Occupational Hygiene Association. So, we've been around for a long time and we've also been very active in occupational hygiene worldwide for a very long time.

(R) So, why is occupational hygiene and the AIOH so important to workplaces today in Australia?

(N) Well, look, occupational hygiene really is preventative health for the workplace. So, occupational hygiene is crucial in any workplace health program because it's about prevention. So, we're looking at stopping people becoming unhealthy and unwell at work. We play a vital role in raising awareness of hazards, so we're recognising hazards, evaluating those hazards and the extent of them, and then controlling those hazards in the workplace. So, it's really about trying to prevent and stop the need for treatment.

(R) I know we did the episode with Peter Aspinall, as I mentioned before, on what is occupational hygiene, and we really spoke about for workers, obviously safety, not being affected today by an injury, but also not being exposed to stuff that's going to affect them tomorrow, which is that health side of things.

(N) Yeah, I always actually normally describe it to people as we're the health part of health and safety. So, where your safety professionals are looking for hazards in the workplace, we're looking for things that can cause disease. So, illness and disease as opposed to injury is our focus and it's really all about preventing.

(R) So, what got you into occupational hygiene to begin with? Obviously, it's become a big part of your life and now you're the current president of the AIOH, so what does occupational hygiene mean to you and why do you still do it

(N) Well, look, it's really interesting. I think one of the real strengths of our profession is that our practitioners and our professionals come from very diverse backgrounds and most of us have come to occupational hygiene from somewhere else. So, for me, I had a biology background and in actual fact, did marine biology as an undergrad and a little bit of postgraduate work, and I ended up falling into occupational hygiene, as many do. I did some work at an alumina refinery and they offered me a job in occupational hygiene. And as most people ask when they first hear the term, I did need to ask, "What is occupational hygiene," but soon developed a love for it. I really feel like it's valuable work. We really make a difference and it's extremely rewarding both intellectually and in terms of the work we do and the positive effect we have on workplaces.

(R) So, for those that haven't listened to the episode we did previously with Peter about what is occupational hygiene, how would you describe what occupational hygiene is and what does occupational hygiene mean to you personally?

(N) Yeah, look, occupational hygiene in a technical and textbook sense is described as the recognition, evaluation and control of hazards in the workplace, which means that what we do is we have a look at people's workplaces. We identify the things that can harm them. We assess whether there's a risk, and if there is, we control it. So, that's the basic process of occupational hygiene. I like to think of it as the health side of health and safety, and it's really about ensuring that everybody goes home from work just as healthy as what they arrived. In terms of what occupational hygiene means to me, really, I think occupational hygiene is about influence and advocacy. We're about identifying hazards in the workplace, assessing them and controlling them, but we're also about advocating on behalf of those workers, to make sure that they've got a healthy environment in which to work, and advocating for workers' rights and for workers' health.

(R) And what they're being exposed to today doesn't affect them tomorrow as well. Long after they've changed jobs or changed careers, they shouldn't be affected by something that happened 10, 20, 30, 40 years ago maybe.

(N) Absolutely, and that's really one of the conundrums of occupational hygiene and something that you really have to understand is that unlike injury where the effect is immediate, you're often being exposed to things and you have no immediate sensation of any ill-effect, and there's no obvious signs or symptoms of any ill-effect, and the disease may manifest many years or decades later. So, it's really crucial that somebody with some understanding of the process is there to identify those hazards, because they're not inherently obvious to people who don't understand what they're looking for.

(R) There's a certain level of knowledge that comes along being an occupational hygienist that all workers won't have, to look at a situation to know, "Hey, that may actually pose a significant risk." So, I would back that statement of advocacy, that we use that knowledge for workers everywhere.

(N) Yeah, definitely, and it's a common theme when you do go to a workplace and you start asking questions, is that the worker will say, "Wow, I didn't know. I didn't know that what I've been doing has been exposing me to that, and I didn't know that what I was dealing with was hazardous." So, it's really important that part of what we do is educating the workforce because at the end of the day, the people with the ultimate control of what they're exposed to is actually the worker themselves. They can certainly make choices and have actions that will positively influence their health, if they know what to do, if they've got the right information.

(R) So, as the current president of the AIOH, what does that role actually entail?

(N) It's a very busy role, I can tell you that from my first three months in office. The AIOH is a not-for-profit or a member-based organisation, so we are a largely volunteer organisation. We have a small staff that support us and do a fantastic job in keeping the wheels moving. But essentially, the Council and the committees that do a large amount of our advocacy and our scientific contributions are all volunteer committees. So, as the president, my role is to keep us moving towards the goals within our strategies. We have a strategic plan and we have some objectives on the strategic plan. And my role is to make sure that our committees and our Council and our members are all working towards achieving the objectives on our strategic plan. And those objectives are around professionalism. They're around improving the practice of occupational hygiene, and they're around advocacy and influence.

(R) It leads in quite nicely to my next question is well, what does the AIOH do, or how does the AIOH operate to impact workers, workplaces, to create healthier, safer workplaces? How does the AIOH actually go about doing that?

(N) We're very active and we do a lot and we have a few focuses. Obviously, we focus on our members. So, we provide services. We provide continuing education. We provide a certification program for our members. So, we are aiming to really raise the professionalism of occupational hygiene in Australia and ensure that our professionals are competent and well-informed, and current in their knowledge. We also focus on the workplace and the workers, so we're providing information to them. We have seminars, events, and we also have an education program which we are rolling out called Breathe Freely. This is a program that has been hugely successful in the UK, developed by the British Occupational Hygiene Society, and it's essentially a repository of web-based resources that are plain language, easy to use, can be used by workplaces to help control the hazards in their work environment. They provide toolboxes, checklists and fact sheets and some quite easy to use tools that can help them make sure that they're keeping their workplace

healthy. Combined with the website, we are planning to do some roadshows around Australia which are taking information out on topics of interest, so there'll be themes along the lines of engineered stone and silica. There'll be themes that cover construction hazards and there are themes that cover mining hazards. And these roadshows will really be about a collaboration between occupational hygienists, regulators, employees and industry, to get a useful information package out to the people who can influence positive health in the workplace, so your health and safety managers, your health and safety reps, and people who can take this information back to their workplace and improve it.

(R) Practical tools; that's going to make a real difference. That's great. Codes of practices are fantastic. Australian Standards are fantastic. But if it's not easy to understand, you're not going to move the needle that much, so I'm excited to see that as that progresses over the near future.

(N) Yeah, absolutely. So, it's about what are your hazards, but more importantly, it's also about how do you control them? So, it's simple information that you don't need an occupational hygienist to interpret.

(R) So, what else are the AIOH doing?

(N) I think part of our role at the AIOH is also to lobby. So, we've actively been lobbying government departments to try and ensure that prevention is firmly a focus of the National Strategy of Occupational Lung Disease. We're collaborating with organisations who have similar objectives, like the Lung Foundation, the Royal Australian College of Physicians, Cancer Council, so that we're all talking about occupational lung diseases, and we're approaching it from a slightly different angle, but we're all talking the same language. We need a coordinated response to occupational health issues in Australia and I think part of our job is to lobby and make sure that prevention is part of that strategy. One of the other things we're

doing to increase the professionalism of occupational hygiene practice in Australia is developing a respiratory protection fit testing, training and accreditation scheme. So, there's a lot of industries that rely on respiratory protection for control of hazards in the workplace, and while as an occupational hygienist, I am the first to promote the hierarchy of controls. Obviously, if we can remove the hazard, that's ideal. If we can't, then putting some engineering controls in place or removing workers from the area of exposure are really good strategies. But unfortunately, in some industries, in some workplaces, that still doesn't bring exposure down enough and we do need to rely on respiratory protection. So, if we are relying on respiratory protection, it's really important to know that the worker is actually being protected. And unfortunately, fit testing is commonly done in Australia, but not so commonly done really well. Part of any program requires training as well as fit testing, and we're really trying to ensure that people who are providing this service are actually making sure the employee is getting the best protection they can from their respiratory protection.

(R) Something we've spoken many times about on this particular podcast about respiratory protection and PPE, the whole that it does rely on the worker to do the right thing, so we want to give them the right information. Are there other things that the AIOH are doing as well?

(N) Yeah, we have available quite a few position papers and guidance documents on our website as well. We have respirable crystalline silica, diesel particulate matter. We also have guidelines on report writing, guidelines on sampling strategy, and those things that are useful tools for people starting out in hygiene.

(R) So, those position papers, is that free to anyone to go on? So, you don't have to be a hygienist to actually access some of that information?



(N) The key messages from those position papers are posted on our website free to access. We really want people to be able to get on and get some information that can help them. And those key messages summarise the position papers. If you'd like the full content and really to delve down into the literature searches and really interrogate the scientific information that's been used to form the position papers, the full access version is a paid service.

(R) So, you mentioned the BOHS, the British Occupational Hygiene Society. Now, we all know Australia is the centre of the world, but are there other associations around the world that are obviously trying to operate similar with the objectives of the association?

(N) Yeah, there certainly is. So, we have quite a few memorandums of understanding with other hygiene associations throughout the world. The British Occupational Hygiene Society is one of them and it's through this memorandum of understanding that they've generously helped us establish the Breathe Freely program in Australia. We also liaise closely with our American Industrial Hygiene Association compatriots and we have trilateral meetings with them twice a year at the various conferences. And we just recently signed a memorandum of understanding with the South African Institute of Occupational Safety and Health, and also the New Zealand Occupational Hygiene Society. We also have really close linkages into the Asian Network of Occupational Hygiene. So, we have memorandums with the Malaysian Industrial Hygiene Association, the Indonesian Industrial Hygiene Association and the Vietnamese Industrial Hygiene Association. And it's through this network that we are able to provide support in the Asian regions to develop their occupational hygiene capacity because this is not something that they've had a lot of access to and part of this agreement is that we invite delegates to come over to our conference and we send representatives over to their conferences. And we share information.

(R) Workers everywhere across the globe have the same right to be safe at work and have their health not affected by workplace exposures, and we all know different countries and areas have different working conditions, but it's no less important that moving forward, wherever a workplace is at.

(N) Yeah, you're absolutely right, and those issues that are occurring in workplaces in Australia are occurring in workplaces all over the world. So, if we can share resources and share knowledge, and really help highlight occupational issues that we've found and some of the learnings from those, then we are going to not only improve the practice of occupational hygiene in Australia, but also throughout the world.

(R) So, for the budding occupational hygienists that are out there, where can they go to get further information on occupational hygiene, in addition to the AIOH website?

(N) Well, the Australian Institute of Occupational Hygiene website is a valuable resource. I would also encourage you to have a look at some of the international websites. So, the British Occupational Hygiene Society website is very good and particularly the Breathe Freely website and also the Breathe Freely Australia website. So, obviously if you're looking for Australian relative information, then the Breathe Freely Australia website will be the one to access. But other useful websites, the International Occupational Hygiene Association website pulls together a lot of information from around the world, because they are an association of associations. So, the International Occupational Hygiene Associations represents its member organisations. Through that, you can access a lot of resources from all different parts of the world. The other really good place to access information is the Institute of Occupational Medicine in the UK. Even though it's called the Institute of Occupational Medicine, hygiene is actually at the core of what they do. It's a multidisciplinary organisation which has a combination

of hygienists, toxicologists and research scientists that pull together a lot of data from the UK, and they really do guide a lot of the work that's done in occupational hygiene in the UK, and we certainly do learn a lot from them. So, they provide a lot of good resources.

(R) Get your fingers on some keyboard and track down what you're after because there's plenty of options out there to get some good information.

(N) There certainly is and in all honesty, if you're looking at a career in occupational hygiene, and it's something that you're interested in, then find your closest hygienist and speak to them, because most hygienists are very passionate about what they do, and as I said, they all come from really varied backgrounds. So, there's no one way to become an occupational hygienist. We're very accepting and we're very encouraging in the occupational hygiene world, and we value our diversity. So, regardless of what your background is, if you think you have a passion for health and preventative health, then certainly occupational hygiene is a career you should consider.

(R) You did take the question out of my mouth, asking what people should do. So, thank you for that. That is fantastic. If you had to sum up who the AIOH are and their objectives, what would you want to leave with our listeners today?

(N) So, yeah, look, the Australian Institute of Occupational Hygienists is the peak professional body, representing the profession of occupational hygiene in Australia. But our absolute underlying core objective is to ensure a healthy working environment for all Australians.

(R) Well, thank you so much for your time today, Julia. Thanks for coming in.

(N) You're welcome. It's been a pleasure.

(R) Well, thanks for listening, everyone. You can get in contact with the show by sending an email to [scienceofsafetysz@mmm.com](mailto:scienceofsafetysz@mmm.com). If you have any further questions or topic suggestions or you'd like some assistance around appropriate selection and use around PPE or any of the topics that we have spoken about, 3M are certainly here to help. You can also visit our website, [3m.com.au/sospodcast](http://3m.com.au/sospodcast) for further resources on the AIOH as well as the topic and transcript of the chat that Julia and I have had today. Be sure to subscribe and share through Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Google Podcasts or wherever you get this podcast from and as Anthony J D'Angelo said, "Develop a passion for learning. If you do, you will never cease to grow." Thanks for listening and have a safe day.