Poor Training a Factor in Deaths

A combination of poor training and an oxygen-deficient atmosphere killed four people at the decommissioned Sullivan lead/zinc mine in southeastern British Columbia in May. The dead included two paramedics responding to a call for help.

Fred Hermann, BC's chief mine inspector, said he has never heard of a similar incident occurring in Canada or elsewhere in the world. A nearby waste dump that had been covered up in 2005 was decomposing and sending carbon dioxide and nitrogen into a nearby water-testing shed through a drainage pipe. Other employees had been working at the site for a week without any problems, but environmental consultant Doug Erickson, Teck Cominco employee Bob Newcombe and paramedics Kim Weitzel and Shawn Currier weren't so fortunate.

Erickson was the first to die. When he didn't return from the old mine, Newcombe went searching for him. He, too, was overcome, but not before calling 911 to report that he had found a body.

Weitzel entered the shed and shouted to her partner, Currier, before falling silent. He died while trying to help her. Hermann said the oxygen content was only six percent, far below the 21 percent content (necessary to sustain life) in normal air.

According to Hermann, Currier lacked basic hazard recognition training that could have saved his life. Since the fatalities occurred, paramedic training in BC has been bolstered with mandatory courses on environmental hazards, exposure control and risk management.

"We are doing additional research and tests to determine what caused the oxygen-depleted air to be in the shed," said Hermann.

Mines throughout British Columbia have been advised by Hermann to check areas where gases heavier than air could collect. They have also been told to restrict access to water sampling areas.