Health Hazards and Innovations in the Shipyards

The World War II Richmond shipyards achieved many historic distinctions—super-production, employment opportunities for women and minorities, employment-linked childcare, and creation of the Kaiser's own health care system. Among the least known historic contributions were achievements in medical research, treatment, and exceptional level of care for workers.

Shipbuilding was notoriously dangerous work among wartime industries, more so than manufacturing tanks, aircraft, and explosives. Between 1941 and 1943, there were over seven million casualties, significantly comprised of women workers, among home front industrial workers, compared to fewer than 50,000 in the armed services. Various studies report that women experienced higher rates of disabling injuries than men. In welding and burning operations, injuries among women were almost 50 percent greater than male injuries.

Robin Baker, a former researcher at UC Berkeley’s School of Public Health and past guest speaker at the Visitor Center, believes “the true death toll” for home front industrial workers is underreported since reports fail to include casualties related to asbestos used in shipbuilding.

Richmond implemented the first job placement process to determine which workers could meet the physical demands of various jobs since union rules prohibited pre-employment physical exams. Physical data on Kaiser’s workers and analyses of job requirements resulted in a report called the Physical Demands and Capacities Analysis, which the U.S. War Manpower Commission adopted for job placement of returning servicemen. As a result, many women welders lost positions because they were physically unable to do the work. In response, a shipyard gynecologist developed a strength-training course for women involving lifting heavy objects.

Personal stories are evidence of the hazards these women faced. During the shipbuilding process to determine which workers could meet the physical demands of various jobs since union rules prohibited pre-employment physical exams, personal stories are evidence of the hazards these women faced. During the shipbuilding process, many women welders lost positions because they were physically unable to do the work. In response, a shipyard gynecologist developed a strength-training course for women involving lifting heavy objects.

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The Permanente Journal

Data cited from The Permanente Journal.
We Can Do It…Today!

Performing Arts coordinated a terrific array of entertainment throughout the day including a Virtual Welder, courtesy of the Northern California Carpenters Regional Council, and a Rosie Rally contest winners. Rosie the Riveter Trust, 2018.

We Can Do It…Today!

Marina Bay Park, Richmond, CA 94804

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