

Professional Welders at Risk for Loss of Sense of Smell

San Francisco/Oakland Bay Bridge, and compared their test scores with those of matched normal controls.

Dr. Doty and colleagues found that the mean UPSIT scores of the welders were, on average, seven points lower than those of their matched controls (29.62 and 36.90). Thirty eight (88%) performed more poorly than their controls, although only 3 (7%) had a total loss of their sense of smell. The percentages of those with mild, moderate, or severe loss of the sense of smell were 30.2, 18.6, and 16.3. The researchers report that interestingly, of the 42 subjects who provided information regarding their sense of smell before being tested, more than half were unaware of a problem.

Blood tests were administered to test for blood levels of chemicals found in welding fumes. The blood tests revealed that 40.5% of the welders had abnormally elevated levels of manganese (Mn). Although this suggests that the welders were exposed mainly to Mn, it is not entirely clear whether Mn is the basis of their olfactory problems. In fact, the welders with the highest Mn blood levels exhibited better olfactory function than those with the lowest Mn blood levels.

The welders also underwent a neuropsychological test battery. Dr.

The researchers conclude that the basis of the smell loss among the welders is not entirely clear. They suggest that although the research shows that the welders had smell dysfunction in relation to the matched controls, additional groups, such as ones consisting of non-welder industrial workers, might be of value in better defining the causality.

Marcelo B. Antunes, Penn, and Rosemarie Bowler, San Francisco State University are co-authors on this study.

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Disclosure: Dr. Doty is a major shareholder in Sensonics, Inc., the manufacturer of the olfactory test used in this study.

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