SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS: OH IN EUROPE

In Europe, occupational illness and accidents at work are a heavy burden on both workers and employers. Four million accidents occur annually, which represent enormous economic costs for the European economy. A considerable share of these costs are met through social security systems and public finances.

Major advances have been made over the last five years, however, the loss of income due to absence from work still costs European workers around Euro 1 billion a year. Small and medium-sized enterprises are particularly exposed, accounting for 82% of all occupational injuries and 90% of all fatal accidents. Specific illnesses are on the rise, including musculoskeletal diseases and illnesses caused by psychological strain.

In February 2007, the European Commission adopted the Community Strategy on Health and Safety at Work 2007 – 2013. This strategy aims to achieve an overall 25% reduction of occupational accidents and diseases in the European Union. It sets out a series of actions at European and national levels in the following main areas:

• Improving and simplifying existing legislation and enhancing its implementation in practice through non-binding instruments such as exchange of good practices, awareness-raising campaigns and better information and training.

• Defining and implementing national strategies adjusted to the specific context of each member state. These strategies should target the sectors and companies most affected and fix national targets for reducing occupational accidents and illness.

• Mainstreaming of health and safety at work in other national and European policy areas (education, public health, and research) and finding new synergies.

• Better identifying and assessing potential new risks through more research, exchange of knowledge and practical application of results.

Musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs) are the biggest cause of absence from work in most European member states. ‘Lighten the Load’ is the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work’s 2007 campaign to address MSDs in the workplace. The campaign culminated with the European Week of Safety and Health at Work from 22 to 26 October 2007.

The European MSDs Campaign seeks to promote an integrated management approach to address MSDs, embracing both prevention of MSDs and the retention, rehabilitation and reintegration of workers who already suffer from MSDs.

PAPERS DELIVERED AT THE CONGRESS

Papers covered the whole spectrum of these two main topics of the Congress. It seems that, as far as we think that we are unique in the problems we face regarding OH in South Africa, the reality is that the problems are universal and that some member states face enormous challenges. In the Netherlands the OH nurse (OHN) has been marginalised by new legislation to the effect that many companies have decided to terminate the contracts of OHNs. Since July 2005, businesses were given the opportunity to choose another form of expert support instead of the existing internal or external services provided by the OH services. There is a stipulation that employers and employees will have to reach an agreement concerning this alternative form of OH support. When such a consensus is reached, the company can then arrange and implement the alternative form of support. The Dutch Law of Working Conditions defines this as the ‘made-to-measure’ regulation. If an agreement is not reached, the existing support continues and the compulsory requirements pertaining to the OH service remains in force. The Law of Working Conditions stipulates a contract with a registered OH physician. Further advice and support can be obtained from registered safety engineer experts, occupational industrial hygienists and work organisation specialists. The OHN is not mentioned at all.

LAUNCH OF A UNIQUE MASTERS IN MEDICAL SCIENCE IN OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH NURSING PROGRAMME

During the Congress a Masters Degree in OH Nursing was launched. Harmonising OH Nursing in the European Union (HOHNEU) is an ambitious three-year Leonardo Da Vinci project. It was built on the vision of OHNs across Europe who were represented by FOHNEU and some dedicated OHN lecturers at Sheffield University.

The aim of the project was to develop a Masters Degree in OH Nursing across Europe in whichever country or clinical practice environment they were. To ensure that the Masters programme truly represented the reality of OH nursing in the different countries in the Union, seven partners including universities and OH nursing societies collaborated to develop the programme and make it available online through the Internet.

This unique online programme will normally take three to five years part-time study to complete for the award of the Masters Degree. Students may however, choose to exit the programme at certificate or diploma level. Online tutors will support the students. The first students are due to start the programme in mid-2008.

CLOSURE

Meeting past SASOHN members and colleagues who now work in the UK was a wonderful surprise and comparing notes on OH nursing brought the realisation home that South Africa is still the best place to be involved in OH.

Sonja Kruger, SASOHN President