Report on ICOH2012 Congress

**THE MAIN EVENT**

The International Commission on Occupational Health (ICOH) held its 30th International Congress on Occupational Health (ICOH2012) in Cancún, Mexico, 18–23 March 2012. ICOH is an NGO in official partnership with the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Labour Organization (ILO), as well as three other sister organisations: the International Occupational Hygiene Association (IOHA), the International Ergonomics Association (IEA), and the International Social Security Association (ISSA).

A total of 1745 participants from 91 countries contributed to the success of the scientific meeting and it was gratifying to see that a number of developing countries were represented at this prestigious international forum on occupational health. African delegates represented the following countries: Benin, Botswana, Cameroon, Côte d’Ivoire, Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, Morocco, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda and Zimbabwe.

The theme of ICOH2012, ‘Occupational Health for All: from Research to Practice’, is based on the precept that all workers across the globe require comprehensive health protection to prevent occupational disease or injury, as part of their basic human and labour rights.

Dr Jorge Morales-Camino, ICOH2012 Congress President, reiterated: “To achieve such an important goal [of occupational health for all] we need to take advantage of new scientific information to develop innovative guidelines, new approaches and procedures, training courses, etc. to be applied to workers’ health protection. Over 90% of scientific papers on occupational health are written in industrialised countries; yet it is in developing countries where the most compelling needs in the field of occupational health are a part of everyday reality. The Mexico Congress aims to build a bridge between research and practice in order to help industrialised and developing countries improve the level of health protection for workers, and help prevent occupational injuries and diseases.”

In his Welcome Address, Dr Kazutaka Kogi, ICOH President, stated: “Since the first Congress held in Milan in 1906, our triennial congresses have always played a frontline role in protecting and promoting the health of workers. This role is particularly vital throughout a time of rapid changes in employment structures, working life and work environments caused by the globalising economy. These changes bring about complex health and safety risks to workers in all sectors. It is timely to focus on workplace improvement actions applicable to managing complex risks in increasingly diversifying work situations.”

The Congress, which consisted of more than 200 Special and Free Paper Sessions with close to 1450 presentations, and in excess of 450 poster sessions, was the ideal platform to communicate information on topical issues such as occupational health as a human right; nanotechnologies and their impact on human health; evidence base in occupational health; health services research and evaluation in occupational health; rural health; occupational health for health care workers; education and training in occupational health; climate change and occupational health; and work organisation and psychosocial factors, among others. The Congress emphasised proactive risk management and innovative solution-based approaches, and lived up to the overarching theme of building bridges between research and practice. The Cancún Charter on Occupational Health was a key deliverable of the meeting; it was prepared during the Congress in consultation with numerous stakeholders, and approved and launched at the Closing Ceremony. The Charter aims to enhance the priority of occupational health within political agendas.

An important milestone was achieved at the ICOH2012: the first ICOH Life Achievement Award was bestowed on Dr Jorma Rantanen – former ICOH President, former Director General of the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health (FIOH) – in recognition of his invaluable, life-long contribution to research impact on prevention and policies in the field of occupational health and safety, and his excellent support to ICOH revitalisation and impetus, at international level. Dr Rantanen delivered the opening keynote address, titled ‘Occupational Health as a Human Right’ which focused on the objective of occupational health for all still needing much effort, at national
and international levels, for successful and sustainable implementation.

The remaining 10 keynote addresses, delivered throughout the Congress (two per day), were very topical and thought-provoking, spanning many facets of occupational health:

- Delivery of occupational health to all workers, by Dr Maria Neira – Director of Public Health and Environment, WHO, Geneva, Switzerland;
- Strategic approach to occupational safety and health, by Dr Seiji Machida – Director of SafeWork, ILO, Geneva, Switzerland;
- Radiation exposure issues in the aftermath of the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant accident and the role of occupational health, by Dr Tetsuhito Fukushima, Fukushima Medical University, Japan;
- Learning from the past to prepare for the future of work, by Dr John Howard, Director of the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), USA;
- How to go from applied research to prevention solutions for company employees? The example of INRS in France, by Dr Stephane Pimbert – General Director of the National Institute of Research and Safety, Paris France;
- Let's find out what works in occupational health, by Dr Jos Verbeek – FIOH, Kuopio, Finland;
- Fundamental moral values, cultural diversity and ethics regulation within the health professions, by Godfrey Tangwa - Professor of Philosophy, University of Yaounde, Cameroon;
- Improving psychosocial factors at work: behavioural medicine meets occupational health, by Prof. Norito Kawakami – President of the International Society of Behavioural Medicine, University of Tokyo, Japan;
- Risk management of nanoparticles in the workplace, by Dr Claude Ostiguy – Robert-Sauvé International Research Institute of Occupational Health and Safety, Montreal, Canada; and
- Occupational health aspects of climate change, by Dr Tord Kjellstrom – National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health, Australian National University, and Wellington School of Medicine, New Zealand.

There were 30 semi-plenary sessions (six per day), and two that stood out as having high impact with widespread application, and were well attended by congress participants, were:

Construction safety and health: origin in Europe, advancement in North America, and adoption in India, by Dr Knut Ringen – Senior Science Advisor: Centre for Construction Research and Training, Seattle, USA. The presentation focused on the safety and health problems evident in the construction industry, which are mostly linked to the work structure. Unless there is an organisation with an industry-wide focus dedicated to construction safety and health, high rates of injury and disease will prevail in the sector, worldwide.

International approaches to asbestos, by Prof. Ken Takahashi – Professor of Environmental Epidemiology, University of Occupational and Environmental Health, Kitakyushu, Japan. The main thrust of the presentation was making the case for international collaboration in the occupational health arena for the promotion of a worldwide ban on asbestos, firstly, but also the prevention of exposure, in combination with the effective recognition, reporting and recording of asbestos-related diseases (ARDs) in the respective countries. The current Asian Asbestos Initiative was presented as a good example of the international efforts in eradicating asbestos manufacture and use, as well as ARDs.

The Special Sessions were numerous and in a wide range of disciplines within the broad occupational health field. Of interest to African audiences is the fact that one Special Session was titled ‘Occupational safety and health culture in the African continent’. The Session was organised by the ICOH Scientific Committee on Occupational Health and Development, and invited presentations covered topics such as the current occupational health and safety culture in Africa; transformation on occupational health and safety to attain ‘Zero Harm’ in the South African mining industry; change safety culture in Egypt; an assessment of fire safety measures in the Nairobi commercial sector; safety and health monitoring tools to ensure compliance with the national guidelines within the Ugandan health sector; and gender and occupational health culture in the construction sector in Uganda.

A special vote of thanks and appreciation is extended to Dr Jorge Morales-Camino and Dr Elia Enriquez as the Local Organisers of ICOH2012, for making the Congress such a successful and well attended event. Dr Enriquez and Prof. Bonnie Rogers (ICOH Vice President) were the Co-Chairs of the Scientific Programme and developed the science content in close collaboration with ICOH Scientific Committees and Work Groups, the National Organising Committee, the International Scientific Committee, and many other significant contributors. A special mention goes to Ms Suvi Lehtinen from FIOH who headed the fundraising initiative to develop the support grants that were awarded to participants from developing countries.

MEETINGS ASSOCIATED WITH ICOH2012

The ICOH2012 Congress was the ideal platform to hold numerous meetings of international organisations, ICOH Scientific Committees and Working Groups, as well as meeting of interest groups, as the Congress brought together many occupational health practitioners from around the world.
The 9th Meeting of the WHO Global Network of Collaborating Centres (CCs) for Occupational Health was held in Cancún, 15-16 March 2012, prior to ICOH2012. The Planning Committee of the Network met on 14 March to discuss and confirm the identified priority action areas. The meeting was attended by approximately 120 representatives from the CCs, including three WHO Regional Advisors and the WHO Headquarters secretariat. Representatives of the ILO, ICOH, IEA and IOHA also attended. The main outcome of the meeting was the fine tuning of many months of commitment and effort, into seven defined priority areas for the new Global Network Plan (2012-2017), based on the Global Plan of Action for Workers’ Health.

One of the Business Meetings within the ICOH2012 was that of the African Regional Association of Occupational Health (ARAOH), convened by Prof. Daan Kocks, Chairman of the South African Society of Occupational Medicine (SASOM). Prof. Kocks is to be commended on his tireless efforts to convene an ARAOH meeting at the ICOH2012, particularly since he injured himself in a bad fall on the first day of the Congress, and had to be hospitalised in Cancún, with a fractured arm. Around 30 delegates from Africa attended the ARAOH meeting which was held on the evening of Tuesday 20 March, and chaired by Prof. Kocks, following his hospital discharge. The winners of the competition for the design of the ARAOH logo were announced at the meeting, and the prize was handed over to the deserving winners who were from Senegal. The meeting provided an overview of the main objectives of the newly revitalised ARAOH and outlined activities planned for the near future, including an ARAOH conference proposed to be held in Kenya in 2014.

Another informal meeting was held during ICOH2012, for parties interested in establishing a Mining Network within the scope of ICOH. The meeting was attended by Congress participants who were from the formal and informal mining sectors in various countries (Australia, Denmark, Ghana, Germany, Indonesia, Italy, South Africa). The meeting was proposed as an outcome of a workshop for high risk sectors, which was held at the 9th Meeting of the WHO Global Network of CCs for Occupational Health. A suggestion was made to establish a mining network outside of the WHO CC in Occupational Health, which would focus on developing resources for small scale and informal mining. Gaps identified as priorities for the proposed Mining Network include the expansion of training for radiography and diagnosis of mining related respiratory diseases; focus on infectious diseases in oil and gas industries; and reduction of HIV and TB incidence. Three main themes emerged as potential areas of focus, should the Mining Network become active: small scale gold mining and the elimination of mercury use; capacity building for the management of pneumoconioses; and development of toolkits for good practices in mining.

ACCOLADES AND AWARDS

The ICOH2009 held in Cape Town in March 2009 pioneered the Special Session for Students, as part of the Scientific Programme of the Congress. This practice was successfully implemented again, at ICOH2012, and the announcement for a dedicated Student Poster Session drew much interest and applications from across the globe. Three winners and three runners-up were announced at the Closing Ceremony of ICOH2012.

Two of the runners-up were PhD Students from South Africa; both were awarded ICOH memberships for 2012-2015 as their prize:

• Ms Gill Nelson (University of the Witwatersrand, SA) – poster titled “Silicosis at autopsy in platinum mine workers”.

• Ms Ntombizodwa Ndlovu (National Institute for Occupational Health, SA) – poster titled ‘Clinico-pathological correlation of asbestos-related disease in ex-miners’.

It is worthwhile to note that Ms Nelson was the successful recipient of a student scholarship from SASOM, to attend ICOH2012. The award from SASOM covered congress registration fees, economy class airfare and accommodation costs for the duration of ICOH2012.

During the Congress, ICOH announced newly elected Officers and Board members who will serve for the 2012-2015 triennium. Two South Africans were elected as Board members – Prof. Mary Ross (University of the Witwatersrand and medical consultant to De Beers) for a second term, and Ms Claudina Nogueira (Senior Health and Safety Advisor, Anglo American’s Technical Solutions). Both are members of the SASOM Executive Committee.

The other newly elected ICOH Board members are: Dr Marilyn Fingerhut (USA), Prof. Giovanni Costa (Italy), Prof. Peter Westerholm (Sweden), Prof. Harri Vainio (Finland), Dr Timo Leino (Finland), Prof. Malcolm Sim (Australia), Prof. Yves Roquelaure (France), Dr Elia Enriquez (Mexico), Prof. Norito Kawakami (Japan), Prof. Monique Frings-Dresen (Netherlands), Dr Andrew Curran (UK), Dr Edoardo Santino (Brazil), Dr Seong-Kyu Kang (Republic of Korea), and Dr Patabendi Abeyutunga (Canada).

The ICOH Officers are: President – Dr Kazutaka Kogi, Secretary General – Dr Sergio Iavicoli, Vice President – Ms Suvi Lehtinen, Vice President – Prof. Bonnie Rogers, Past President – Prof. Jorma Rantanen.

ICOH’s 32nd International Congress will be held in 2018 in Dublin, Ireland, as a result of the vote held in Cancún, at the 30th ICOH Congress.

Claudina Nogueira
8 May 2012