

Editorial from the ICOH2009 Scientific Co-Chairs and Coordinator...



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The theme for ICOH2009, the 29th triennial Congress of the International Commission on Occupational Health, is 'Occupational Health: a basic right and valuable asset to society'. The timing of this ICOH congress, which for the first time is being held in sub-Saharan Africa, coincides with unprecedented global economic uncertainty, which presents challenges for the very future of occupational health throughout the world.

Sir Michael Marmot (UK) sets the scene for the ICOH2009 congress with an erudite delivery on 'Health inequities in a globalising world of work; Commission on Social Determinants of Health' (Marmot and Bell, p.4). As an international authority on social inequity and health and the outgoing chair of the World Health Organization's Commission on Social Determinants of Health, he weaves numerous illustrations into a background to the global health scene, and specifically to the influential role played by employment and working conditions in determining health and health equity.

The keynote presentations are grouped according to the five sub-themes for the congress.

GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES AND CHALLENGES

The President of ICOH, Jorma Rantanen (Finland), delivering the opening address on the theme of the congress 'Occupational health services: A right at work; an asset to society', reminds us that over 85% of the total 3 billion workers in the world work and live without having access to occupational health services, and that the global trend is toward declining coverage. He examines the contributing factors and shows a growing body of evidence of the positive economic impact of occupational health in addition to its benefits to health and safety at work. (Rantanen, p.8)

Pier-Alberto Bertazzi (Italy) (p.9) further develops the global perspectives in his paper, 'New diseases of working populations in this millennium: Are they work-related?' reminding us that while there are specific work-related diseases and working time comprises a major portion of people's lives, the latter cannot be clearly demarcated from other living environments in the aetiology of disease. At best, we can only estimate attributable fractions and for many psychosocial factors, even this is impossible.

Maria Neira (WHO) describes the 'Role of occupational health in response to challenges of modern public health' (Neira, Wilburn and Ivanov, p.10). This role is founded upon the World Health Organization's holistic approach to workers' health as reflected in the Global Plan of Action on Workers' Health 2008–2017, and the global process for

strengthening health systems based on the primary health care approach.

PREVENTION: A RIGHT AND ASSET IN THE WORKPLACE

Pamela Hymel (USA) (Hymel and Heron, p.11) discusses 'Health and productivity: Delivering the workforce of the future', noting that too few employers are familiar with the fundamental linkage between health and productivity. She identifies resources and tools already available to help build a healthier workforce, and encourages the use of technology and globally focused professional partnerships to help with deployment of customised programmes internationally.

The importance of 'Occupational health and safety in newly industrialising countries' is elucidated by David Koh (Singapore) (Koh and Sng, p.12) who points out the effect of rapid industrialisation in escalating the burden of occupational health issues and the need to learn from others and for political backing to tackle these issues.

Jukka Takala (EU Agency) (Takala, Hämäläinen and Saarela, p.17) explains the 'Roles of occupational safety and health organisations in global and regional prevention strategies', updating readers on the most recent strategic documents, metrics, stakeholders, priorities and the key role that organisations can play in promoting a safety and health culture.

KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER: RIGHTS AND ASSETS

In 'Training and education in occupational health at all levels', Bonnie Rogers (USA) (p.24) describes both discipline-specific and interdisciplinary initiatives vital to the development of well-prepared and competent occupational health professionals.

Eduardo Algranti (Brazil) (p.33) succinctly covers 'Assessment and communication of old and new hazards and risks' indicating evidence-based similarities and differences between developed and developing nations from classic exposures and diseases to the challenges of the modern economy.

PROTECTING WORKERS: A CHALLENGE TO SOCIETY

In keeping with the congress setting at the tip of Africa, the continent worst affected by the ravages of HIV, Barry Schoub (South Africa) provides an overview of 'Pandemics and HIV/AIDS: An update' (p.37) illustrating the history, emergence and future scenarios of the two major pandemic threats of the 21st century: HIV/AIDS and pandemic influenza.

Louis Loutan (Switzerland) discusses 'Disasters,

humanitarian aid and occupational risks' (p.42) in an exposé of the unusual hazards and high risks involved in providing humanitarian aid in conflict and disaster situations, some exacerbated rather than ameliorated by media coverage.

Exploring the links of obligation, compliance and occupational health, Paul Benjamin (South Africa) (p.43) considers 'Occupational health and safety prevention and compensation laws: Pieces of the same puzzle'. He emphasises the current failure of legislation to protect workers adequately and the challenges of the growing informal sector and suggests options for policy makers to promote better occupational health and safety performance.

BASIC RIGHTS AT WORK

Considering workers' basic right to decent working conditions in a developing continent, Franklin Muchiri (ILO) (p.48) outlines current 'Occupational safety and health issues in Africa' in the context of poverty, development and quality of working life accompanied by poor coverage of occupational health services.

Peter Westerholm (Sweden) explores 'Codes of ethics in occupational health – are they important?' (p.52) in the context of ethical codes by posing questions and presenting a case study that resonates the dilemmas for occupational health professionals globally.

Patrick Loisel (Canada) (p.56) concludes the series of keynote presentations in 'Developing a new paradigm: Work disability prevention'. He covers the research evidence to support the adoption of a broad and interdisciplinary approach to work disability far beyond the biomedical paradigm, a core vision that applies to many other aspects of occupational health.

Within the congress, a wide range of traditional and emerging issues have received attention, many reflecting the interests of the 32 ICOH scientific committees and the local organisations that have supported the development of the scientific programme. Since the South African economy was founded on the mining industry and local scientists have

contributed significantly to occupational health in mining, this topic is highlighted. An important and growing industry in both developing and developed countries – business and humanitarian travel – has generated dedicated sessions for travel related occupational health. Psychosocial aspects of work, ergonomics and related musculoskeletal disease, and advances in nanoparticle research have emerged as leading themes for the scientific programme, so extending the traditional focus on hazards and effects and indicating new priorities for future congresses. An important dimension has been the trend towards the inclusion of the social aspects of occupational health beyond the workplace, such as healthy working and healthy living, and work ability and disability prevention. There is also a strong focus on education and training, which has always paved the way for developments in occupational health worldwide.

We should like to thank not only these keynote speakers who set the scene for a truly remarkable congress, but also the many special session, oral and poster presenters who added a global wealth of expertise in discussing occupational health challenges and solutions. Lastly, our grateful thanks go to the members of the international and local scientific committees and other volunteers for their support and contribution for many months, culminating in a truly memorable ICOH congress.

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From the Editor...

As you know, the 29th International Congress on Occupational Health is taking place in Cape Town, South Africa. This triennial scientific event is supported by the International Commission on Occupational Health. The President of ICOH2009 is Professor Daan Kocks, who has chaired the Organising Committee. In addition to his enormous contribution, many other members of the international occupational health and hygiene community have given unstintingly of their expertise and time to ensure that this event is enriching and memorable.

Occupational Health Southern Africa has been given the great honour of publishing the Keynote presentations in this special issue of our journal. It will be given out to

ICOH2009 delegates, and our subscribers will receive it with their March/ April 2009 issue of the journal. Those of you who have been able to attend the congress will find it a valuable record of the presentations that you have heard. Whilst our readers, who were unable to be present, will undoubtedly benefit from the wealth of information it contains. This landmark publication in our journal's history, promises to be an important addition to your occupational health and hygiene literature.



Linda Grainger