

Role of occupational health in response to challenges of modern public health



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ABSTRACT

The recent decades have brought about dramatic changes in the world of work. The processes of globalisation and economic restructuring have blurred the boundaries between state and private entities and between work and personal life. The traditional practice of occupational health confined inside the corporate fence is no longer adequate to the needs of the working population. New actors, such as global health partnerships, environmental movements, and social security systems play an increasing role in protecting and promoting health at the workplace. There is also increasing awareness that the health of workers is determined not only by occupational health and safety risks, but also by social factors, individual behaviour and access to health services.

For these reasons, the World Health Organization has adopted a holistic approach to workers' health. This approach was reflected in the Global Plan of Action on Workers' Health 2008-2017 that was endorsed by the 60th World Health Assembly. This plan urges countries to strengthen governance for workers' health, to develop practical technologies for protecting and promoting health at the workplace, to work towards full coverage of all workers with basic occupational health services, to articulate evidence for action and to incorporate workers' health in all policies. The WHO global plan of action will be implemented in conjunction with the ILO Convention 187 on the promotional framework for occupational safety and health and the other international labour standards in this area. It is expected that the implementation of global, regional and country action on workers' health will contribute to achieving health equity, full and productive employment and decent work for all workers.

Furthermore, WHO has launched a global process for strengthening health systems based on the primary health care approach. This includes four broad, interlinked policy directions that represent core primary health care principles: universal coverage; people-centred services; healthy public policies, and leadership. The 1988 Alma Ata Declaration on Primary Health Care called for bringing health as close as possible to where people live and work. However, the workplace has been largely absent from the international discourse of primary health care. There is an unfinished agenda on improving access of all workers to occupational health services, putting workers in the centre of occupational health care, ensuring coordinated response by all components of the health system to the specific needs of the working population, and collaboration between health, labour and economic sectors.

The contribution of occupational health to health security at international and community level is a third area of action for WHO. Global climate change will dramatically affect the working conditions of more than 1,2 billion persons working outdoors, such as agricultural and construction workers. In addition the development of green jobs and technologies is expected to affect occupational health in different ways. The international transfer of hazardous processes and materials to developing countries undermines their ability to protect the health of their workers. Global health threats such as avian influenza and SARS hit first at the workplace. The financial crisis will also have an impact upon the health of workers by increasing unemployment and precarious employment, reducing the coverage of safety nets and cutting down investment on preventive measures. Occupational health services can contribute to preserving and enhancing labour productivity and to sustaining human capital by developing and applying cost-effective interventions and by articulating economic arguments for protecting and promoting the health of workers.

Key words: occupational health, primary health care, health security, WHO