

The unsuspected dimensions of Occupational Health¹

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Introduction

Why to present such a general topic?

- Because it is time to enlarge the scope of this broad domain too often restricted to the legal framework of health and safety, and suffering from a lack of consideration, understanding and visibility, as well as from many misconceptions about Health at Work.
- Because it is important to continuously denounce the fundamental pollution, which erodes Work – an essential pillar of our Society – illustrated by present negative trends, such as denial of the reality (e.g., burnout, depression, suicides, cancers, diseases) and contempt for human beings and their values, expectations and needs, as well as to denounce the surprising disregard for the resultant suffering.
- Because the victims are not only workers and employees but also managers and decision-makers compelled to meet unreachable goals in terms of economy (imposed by the stakeholders) and submitted to huge pressure and unbearable rhythms and workloads.

The misuse of “management standards” contributes to the dehumanization of working conditions where the only criterion for success is profit. In such cases, managers willing to defend human values and social responsibility of the enterprise are quickly replaced by “young dogs” without any scruple.

The lack of visibility of Occupational Health

Although Occupational Health should be an important part of Public Health, it is often restricted to a field limited to the social insurances and the labor laws of a country, without considering its large impact on health at large, on the economy and on the environment. This is partly explained by cultural and political reasons. Work is linked to suffering. In French, for instance, the word “travail” comes from a Latin word “tripalium” which was a torture instrument. Therefore this negative feeling about work and about the professions dedicated to the workers’ health protection, is one of the reasons that have led to prejudices and to a biased perception of the field of Occupational Health.

This editorial summarizes briefly the challenges all the safety and health professions should cope with in order to give Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) a better visibility, a greater awareness among the public and the stakeholders and its vital role in our society.

The present situation in Occupational Safety and Health

In the public, there is a growing fear of risks (electro-smog, nanomaterials, biohazards, ionizing radiations, etc.) and chemicals remain one of the top concerns. The European regulation REACH² is a clear illustration of this phenomenon. Although there were a lot of directives about chemicals, the European Community considered that they were not efficient enough to protect the

¹ Summary of a keynote presentation at the 10th ORP International Congress (Prevention of Occupational Risks); Bilbao, 23-25 May 2012

² REACH : Registration, Evaluation, Authorization and restriction of CHemicals

consumers, the environment and the workers and that a stronger regulation was necessary. This regulation should promote the disciplines which are specialized in the risk management of these risks, such as Occupational Hygiene. But this is not the case and we are in front of a strange paradox: there is a growing need of experts able to assess and control the chronic risks while the stakeholders, the academic institutions and the politicians decrease their support to research, education and training in Occupational Health. Among the very many examples we can cite the closing of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health in Sweden, the dissolution of the National Institute in Italy in the National Insurance Company, similar dissolution in France in the context of national agencies, the declaration of war against the health and safety culture in the UK made by the Prime Minister, etc.

In the field and according to the scientific literature, the “traditional risks”, such as toxic chemicals, noise, dust, radiations, etc. are decreasing in most of the developed countries where the management is becoming more professional with time. This is a general trend but there are a few exceptions and a few well-known pollutants such as lead, asbestos or silica, remain insufficiently controlled in some situations.

On the other hand the psychosocial problems are continuously increasing with time without any sign of leveling off. The regular survey of the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions in all the countries of the European Unions, clearly show that since 1990 (the first survey) up to 2010 (the most recent one) the indicators related to psychosocial problems, such as stress, time pressure, work overload, high pace of work, etc. are increasing. This means that since more than 20 years, the control of these major problems has failed. This is extremely serious since the damages on human health (depression, burnout and suicides) and on the economy are huge. What are the reasons of this incredible situation? Among the most relevant hypotheses are:

- the lack of awareness of the economic burden of bad working conditions;
- the managers are not informed and educated to cope adequately with these problems;
- the management standards are misused and do not include properly the human factors;
- unethical conducts are frequent and unfortunately not decreasing.

Occupational Health overlaps with major domains of our society

The unsuspected dimensions of Occupational Health concern the overlapping of this field with three main domains of our society: public health, environmental protection and economy.

For Public Health, it is often ignored that all the diseases related to the working conditions which are not officially recognized as “occupational diseases” (*i.e.* compensated by the social insurances) are much more numerous and have a huge economic burden on the society. In fact, the recognized “occupational diseases” are the small tip of a very large iceberg where the hidden part represents the diseases related to work but not fulfilling the insurance criteria to be recognized. All the safety and health professionals are aware of this fact but it seems that the stakeholders are not. JP Leigh, who is, in the USA, an expert in the assessment of the economic burden of diseases, including the occupational injuries and illnesses, published in 1997 and in 2011³ quite impressive results showing that occupational injuries and illnesses (only the officially recognized ones) represent

³ Leigh JP. Economic Burden of Occupational Injury and Illness in the United States. *Milbank Q.* 2011 Dec;89(4):728-72.

an economic burden (direct and indirect costs) more important than cancer, cardiovascular diseases, AIDS, diabetes or Alzheimer.

For the environmental protection it is obvious that there is a strong link between the occupational environment and the general environment. Emissions from the workplaces in air, water or soils, as well as transport of wastes and toxic chemicals are a clear illustration of this link. Therefore the controls of these emissions at the workplaces contribute to a very large extent to the protection of the environment. We should not forget also that major accidents are very often related to a failure in risk management at the workplace. Seveso, Bhopal, Toulouse (France), would not have occurred if the Occupational Safety and Health preventive measures had been taken. It is striking that in the Seveso Directive, there is no mention of this link and of the major contribution that experts in OSH could bring. One of the main reasons for this, beside the lack of awareness of the importance of OHS, comes from the fact that the different departments (ministries) have difficulties to work together and focus on their own problems and tasks without collaborating enough with the other departments. It is a pity, for example, that the environmental protection does not consider the protection of the working environment as one of their responsibilities.

For the economy, it is not easy to assess the impact of bad working conditions on the business but there are a lot of publications showing that “good health is good business”⁴. It is highly profitable to invest in prevention and in the improvement of the working conditions. Estimation of the cost of absenteeism for the enterprises and for the concerned people has been done in some countries and again, the costs are huge. Absenteeism may reflect for one part, the climate of a small or medium enterprise or of a sector or department of a big industry and is often directly related to the working conditions and to the management style of the company. This is only one example, but there are many other links between the healthy environment of a company and its “economic health”. The most surprising fact is that all these scientific and economic evidences do not seem to influence many managers or stakeholders!

The essential role of Occupational Hygiene

Occupational Hygiene is the science and the art devoted to the anticipation, recognition, evaluation, prevention, and control of those environmental factors or stresses arising in or from the workplace which may cause sickness, impaired health and well-being, or significant discomfort among workers or among citizens of the community⁵.

Its role is essential to control the risks at the workplace and also to promote, to stimulate and to boost a multidisciplinary approach and cross-fertilization among the OSH professionals (the physicians, the psychologists, the ergonomists, etc.) as well as the social partners.

The occupational hygienists are experts for the exposure assessment. They have introduced the “Occupational Exposure Limits” which are an efficient tool to interpret the exposure data and to prevent the acute and chronic health effects on the workers. In this respect, they represent both in the field and in education and research one of the most important partners.

Ethics and transparency guide these professionals in performing their job with a high level of scientific, technical and moral values.

⁴ This was a slogan of the British Occupational Hygiene Society (BOHS), a few years ago.

⁵ This definition comes from the American Industrial Hygiene Association (AIHA), beside the fact that in the USA “Occupational Hygiene” is called “Industrial Hygiene”.

Emerging values

According to surveys at the workplace and among the workers and the managers, it becomes clear that new values are emerging and that they should enter in the scope of Occupational Health. One of the most important topics is the “meaning of work”. People want to work not only for the salary but also for the pleasure to do well their jobs, to be recognized in their effort, to feel they contribute to something useful for the society, etc. This is a reaction to the actual trend in the work organization where these values are not considered as important. The respect of the human being (related to age and painful tasks, to the work-life balance, to the protection of vulnerable populations, etc.) which depends on the management (managers’ awareness and empathy) is also important emerging values.

The social responsibility of enterprises that becomes more and more popular belongs to these values also. The “citizenship” of enterprises is emerging as a very important topic and is promoting very relevant aspects such as:

- Sustainable development;
- Fair trade;
- Human rights;
- Working conditions;
- Role in the community;
- Consumers protection

As this has been considered as more and more important, a new ISO⁶ standard has been issued in 2010: the ISO standard 26’000 (Societal responsibility).

Moreover, a new science is emerging: the salutogenesis. It focuses on factors that support human health and well-being rather than of factors that cause diseases. This new paradigm, which promote a proactive action at the workplace instead of the traditional reactive approach (action starts only when the problem is identified and proven, such as for silicosis or asbestosis!) represent very promising development in the field of Occupational Health.

To dare a dream of a better Society is a step towards its construction.

⁶ ISO : International Standardisation Organisation, Geneva, Switzerland