

Occupational health services as a key element of national occupational safety and health systems

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The primary task of occupational health services is the protection of the health of workers in relation to the working environment. This task is carried out through the performance of occupational health practice with the aim of preventing occupational accidents, injuries and diseases and improving the working environment. It is a multidisciplinary activity that should not be considered as limited to professional activities performed by occupational safety and health specialists only, which is the traditional belief. It also involves activities carried out by the governmental agencies, employers, workers, managers, legislators, standard-setting and enforcement bodies and other institutions operating in the area of occupational health. It requires a well-developed infrastructure both at the national and enterprise levels. The infrastructure for occupational health practice comprises various elements which, when taken together, form the national occupational safety and health system, where the pivotal role of efficient occupational health services is an absolute requirement.

Although the establishment of occupational health services as teams of specialists providing occupational health under different organizational models is mandatory under many national laws, the coverage of the working population by such services is generally low, reaching on average 5-10% in developing countries and 20-50% in industrialized ones, with a few exceptions. Lately, there has been a downward trend to cut their activities even further due to poorly controlled work-related health expenditures and increased competition imposed on enterprises by current trends of globalization and by the financial crisis.

In order to provide an impetus to the expansion of occupational health services, it is necessary to link their development to the development of national occupational safety and health systems representing the entire infrastructure for occupational health practice. The International Labour Conference of the ILO adopted in 2003 a Global Strategy on Occupational Safety and Health based on the management systems approach to occupational safety and health (OSH). The key element of this approach is the development of national OSH programmes focusing on national priorities that should be defined on the basis of the analysis of national situations and summarized as national OSH profiles. The national programmes are time-bound national strategies that should provide for coherent improvement of national OSH systems as an integral part of national socio-economic development. Occupational health services, being the key element of national OSH systems, will need to be specifically targeted in the overall process of their development and continuous improvement. This new approach is advocated by the ILO Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 2006 (No.187), which aims to promote occupational safety and health globally.