

ILO Says Not Enough Attention Given to Occupational Diseases



The OHS laws require employers to take reasonable steps to protect the health and safety of their workers—in other words, to keep them from getting injured or sick on the job. While OHS programs tend to give a lot of attention to injury prevention, they often give short shrift to preventing occupational diseases.

For example, when we recently asked if your OHS program addresses occupational illnesses as well as injuries, you said:

- Yes, but the focus is on injury prevention. (55%)
- No, occupational illnesses aren't a priority. (23%)
- Yes, it addresses both equally. (23%)

But according to the International Labour Organization (ILO), the number of work-related diseases is growing—and they claim an estimated *2 million lives per year*. In contrast, only about 321,000 workers die each year in workplace incidents/accidents.

The ILO recently released a report, *The Prevention of Occupational Diseases*, on what it calls a 'hidden epidemic.'

The report notes that technological, social and organizational changes in the workplace brought about by rapid globalization have been accompanied by emerging risks and new challenges. Although some traditional risks have declined due to improved safety, technological advances and better regulation, they continue to take an unacceptably heavy toll on workers' health.

In addition, new forms of occupational disease are increasing without adequate preventive, protective and control measures. For example, new technologies, such as nanotechnologies and certain biotechnologies, pose new and unidentified hazards in the workplace. Emerging risks include poor ergonomic conditions, exposure to electromagnetic radiation and psychosocial risks.

Work-related stress and its health consequences have emerged as a matter of great concern. Companies are increasingly confronted with psychological harassment, mobbing, bullying, sexual harassment and other forms of violence. Workers may turn to unhealthy behaviours, such as the abuse of alcohol and drugs, in an attempt to cope with stress, creating additional workplace safety issues.

Such stress impacts worker health. Links have been found between stress and heart, musculoskeletal and digestive conditions. And if prolonged, work-related stress can contribute to serious cardiovascular disorders.

The ILO report observes that although many governments and employers' and workers' organizations are now placing greater emphasis on the prevention of occupational diseases, such prevention isn't getting the priority warranted by the scale and severity of the occupational disease epidemic.

To strengthen national OSH systems' capacity for dealing effectively with the prevention of occupational diseases, the ILO says countries need to:

- Improve the collaboration of OHS and social security institutions in dealing with prevention, early detection, treatment and compensation of occupational diseases;
- Integrate the prevention of occupational diseases into labour inspection programmes, especially hazardous sectors, such as mining, construction and agriculture;
- Strengthen employment compensation schemes in national social security systems to adequately deal with the recognition, treatment and compensation of occupational diseases;
- Improve the capacity of occupational health services for health surveillance, monitoring of the working environment and implementation of preventive measures;
- Update national lists of occupational diseases taking into account the ILO list; and
- Reinforce social dialogue at national, industry sector and workplace levels among governments, employers and workers and their organizations on issues related to occupational health and safety.