The Seoul Declaration on Safety and Health at Work: Why It Matters for Global Public Health?

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Introduction

Approximately 3 billion people, or about one-half of the world's population, are economically active. Their health is determined by a number of risks in the occupational environment, social factors, behaviours and access to health services. When carried out under favourable conditions, work provides income to support human needs and has a positive impact on the health and well-being of individuals and on social and economic development.

However, the majority of the world's workers are still employed in unhealthy and unsafe working conditions resulting annually in about two million deaths from disease and injuries. Occupational risk factors account for a substantial part of the burden of chronic diseases. Despite that, still only a tiny minority of workers have access to occupational health services to prevent disease and injury at work.

The workplace provides opportunities to implement public health interventions, such as treatment of tuberculosis, immunizations against certain infectious diseases, tobacco control, as well as promotion of healthy diet, physical activity, well-being and mental health. The workplace also allows to disseminate among workers, their families, and neighbouring communities certain important public health messages to prevent and control HIV/AIDS, malaria and other major health threats. In some countries, primary healthcare services are being provided through the workplace.

The recent decades brought about dramatic changes in the world of work. The processes of globalization and economic restructuring 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 for the needs of the working population. In addition to health and labour sectors and social partners, new actors are getting increasingly involved in actions related to protecting and promoting the health of workers, such as global health partnerships, environmental movements, social security.

WHO's role in safety and health at work

The World Health Organization (WHO) is the directing and coordinating authority for health within the United Nations system. It is responsible for providing leadership on global health matters, shaping the health research agenda, setting norms and standards, articulating evidence-based policy options, providing technical support to countries and monitoring and assessing health trends. WHO operates in an increasingly complex and rapidly changing landscape. The boundaries of public health action have become blurred, extending into other sectors that influence health opportunities and outcomes.

The main functions of WHO mandated in Article 2 of its Constitution include promoting the "improvement of working conditions and other aspects of environmental hygiene" 1. The World Summit on Sustainable Development, Johannesburg 2002, recommended strengthening and promoting WHO's programme to "reduce occupational deaths, injuries and illnesses, and link occupational health with public health promotion as a means of promoting public health and education." 2

The 60th World Health Assembly in 2007 expressed concern that despite the existence of interventions for primary prevention of occupational hazards and for developing healthy workplaces there are still major gaps between and within countries in the exposure of workers and local communities to occupational hazards and in their access to occupational health services. Stressing that the health of workers is an essential prerequisite for productivity and economic development, the Health Assembly endorsed a Global Plan of Action on Workers' Health for the period 2008-2017. 3 The 193 Member States of WHO were urged to devise national policies and plans for its implementation in consultation with

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partnerships with other UN agencies and with major

The WHO Global Plan of Action on Workers' Health provides a new policy framework for concerted action to protect, promote and improve the health of all workers. The Plan addresses all aspects of workers' health, including primary prevention of occupational hazards, protection and promotion of health at work, employment conditions, and improving the response of health systems to workers' health. In such a way it links occupational health to public health. The priorities for WHO's global action on workers' health are: (1) devising and implementing policy instruments on workers' health; (2) protecting and promoting health at the workplace; (3) improving the performance of and access to occupational health services; (4) providing and communicating evidence for action and practice; and (5) incorporating workers' health into other policies.

The Plan of Action is intended to guide the Member States and WHO in their activities on workers' health over the period 2008-2017. It is expected that it will stimulate the development of policies, infrastructure, technologies and partnerships for improving the health of all workers. In such a way it will contribute towards achieving a basic level of health protection in all workplaces throughout the world. WHO, through its Headquarters, six Regional and 144 Country offices, will work with the Member States to implement the Global Plan of Action. In particular, WHO will promote and engage in partnerships with other UN agencies and with major international stakeholders. It will set international standards, articulate policy options for national agendas, as well as monitor and address trends in workers' health. The progress made will be reviewed by the World Health Assembly in 2013 and 2018 based on a basic set of indicators of achievement.

The Seoul Declaration on Safety and Health at Work

In June 2008 in Seoul, Republic of Korea, 46 high ranking decision-makers from around the world, including labour and health ministers, representatives of workers and employers as well as CEOs of leading multinational companies gathered together at the first Safety and Health Summit. They discussed how safety and health can promote basic human rights and economic development and what is needed to put occupational health higher on the national and international political agendas.

The Summit resulted in the adoption of the Seoul Declaration on Safety and Health at Work. In this declaration, occupational safety and health is viewed as a prerequisite for productivity and overall social and economic development and the right to a safe and healthy working environment should be considered a fundamental human right. It argues that globalization must go hand in hand with ensuring safety and health at work and that education, training, consultation and exchange of information are important tools for prevention.

The Seoul Declaration highlights some new elements in the global discourse on occupational safety and health. First, it calls for making safety and health at work the responsibility of the society as a whole and therefore should be made a priority in national and international political agendas. Second, it places emphasis on the importance of preventative culture for reaching the objectives of occupational safety and health. Third, it calls for applying a systemic approach for achieving continuous improvement of occupational safety and health. How these concepts relate to public health?

Protecting and fulfilling human rights are closely linked to promoting and protecting health. For example, violations or lack of attention to human rights, such as slavery, inhuman and degrading treatment, can have serious health consequences. Vulnerability to ill-health can be reduced by taking steps to respect, protect and fulfil human rights, including the rights to information and education.

Health development provides ample opportunities to promote certain human rights, such as the right to participation and freedom from discrimination. The above mentioned WHO Global Plan of Action on Workers' Health specifically argues that all workers should be able to enjoy the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health and favourable working conditions.

Globalization brings about changes in the context of public health. Economic globalization, i.e. the deregulation of trade and investment, has both positive and negative impact on health. On one side, economic growth and the dissemination of technologies have substantially contributed to longer life expectancy. On the other side, some aspects of globalization have so far jeopardized health by worsening social and environmental conditions and increasing health inequities. Similarly, the WHO global plan of action points out that increasing international movement of jobs, products and technologies can help to spread innovative solutions for prevention of occupational hazards, but can also lead to a shift of that risk to less advantaged groups. The growing informal economy is often associated with hazardous working conditions and involves such vulnerable groups as children, pregnant women, older persons and migrant workers.

The Seoul declaration put forward for the first time a global emphasis on taking responsibility health and safety at work by the whole society. Public health research has demonstrated that health is largely determined by factors outside the health sector domain. Therefore ongoing public health efforts aim at integrating health considerations into societal policy-making with the aim to improve population health at all levels. This requires taking account of the health and safety dimension across all government sectors and involving a wide range of stakeholders in addition to the employers and workers' representatives.

The focus on preventative safety and health culture is another feature of the Seoul Declaration. Similarly, the WHO Global Plan of Action stipulates that primary prevention of occupational health hazards should be given priority. Prevention is also cost effective, for example investment in a comprehensive healthy workplace programme may yield returns by three times in savings from prevented sickness absence. Studies commissioned by WHO demonstrated that preventive interventions are worthwhile and good value for money in terms of adding years of healthy life to the average life expectancy.

Finally, the Seoul declaration called for a systemic approach to the management safety and health at work. Such approach is rooted in the ILO Promotion Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention No 198 from 2006 that requires parties to establish, maintain, progressively develop and periodically review a national system for occupational safety and health. Such a system includes regulatory instruments, responsible authorities, enforcement mechanisms, and cooperation between enterprise management and workers. In addition, the national system for occupational safety and health may include other elements, such as national tripartite advisory mechanisms, information services, training, occupational health services, surveillance of occupational diseases and injuries etc.

Likewise, the WHO Global Plan of Action highlights the need to involve all components of health systems in an integrated response to the specific health needs of working populations. WHO urges countries to formulate national policy frameworks for workers’ health that should take account of the relevant international labour conventions, such as the ILO Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention. Such frameworks should include: enactment of legislation; establishment of mechanisms for intersectoral coordination of activities; funding and resource mobilization for protection and promotion of workers’ health; strengthening of the role and capacities of ministries of health; and integration of objectives and actions for workers’ health into national health strategies.

Conclusion

The 2008 Seoul Declaration on Occupational Safety and Health provides a number of avenues for advancing workers' health protection and promotion. The development of "culture of prevention" is linked to the modern vision of public health and its orientation towards primary prevention of diseases, injuries and disabilities. The new focus on responsibility of the whole society and on the systemic perspective to the management of...
occupational safety and health fits with WHO calls for health systems reforms, particularly with regard to leadership and public policies that stimulate intersectoral collaboration on health matters.

The Seoul Declaration can be an important instrument to build coalitions for occupational safety and health in the new socio-economic conditions. The implementation of the WHO Global Plan of Action on Workers' Health endorsed by the World Health Assembly in 2007 is an opportunity to mobilize the contribution of the health sector for reaching the goals of the Seoul Declaration. Such contribution would consist of improving the provision of preventive and curative health services to workers, information, training and dissemination of practical tools for prevention of occupational health risks as well as extending certain public health programmes to the workplaces, for example in the area of health promotion and infection control.

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