

[Main page: Organization: About FIOH: Annual Report](#)

Organization

[About FIOH](#)[Strategy](#)[Annual Report](#)[Organization](#)[Centres of Expertise](#)[Action Programmes](#)[Collaboration](#)[Regional Offices](#)[Open positions](#)

Finnish Institute of Occupational Health - Annual Report

[2005](#) | [2004](#) | [2003](#) | [2002](#) | [2001](#) | [2000](#) | [1999](#)

Annual Report 2006

The review below is a summary of the Annual Report 2006. The whole publication can be ordered from the Office of Information and International Affairs, Ms. [Inkeri Haataja](#),
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Director General's Review

A prosperous year for Finland

The year 2006 was a good year for Finland. The economy expanded, the amount of workplaces grew, and the rate of employment rose steadily. In terms of competitiveness, Finland was among the top countries.

However, not all areas were so successful. Sickness absences rose, and after many good years, occupational accidents were on the up. The increased consumption of alcohol resulted in increased illnesses and mortality rates, and the emphasis on economic competitiveness created an atmosphere of insecurity; redundancies shook the lives of entire localities.

Work and health in Finland in 2006

Our 2006 Work and Health survey revealed that 40% of the working population enjoy their work. Teamwork became more prominent, more attention was paid to workplace atmosphere, and development of work organizations was more active. However, despite these positive developments, causes for concern remain: time pressure has increased, as has mental and physical abuse.

The work/life balance continued to present a challenge; affected by long working hours, constantly changing schedules, and the lack of flexible hours and task management. An increasing number of the working population were also torn between care responsibilities, for their own children and their ageing parents.

About half of the working population thought about retiring early, due to health or other reasons. People considered good health, a good financial situation and inspiring, interesting and challenging work as things which could make them consider staying in work life for longer.

We looked for some everyday examples of successful work environments, and found them in organizations recognized for their good personnel management.

The reasons behind their success were quite simple: pleasant atmosphere, openness and trust, democratic discussion in everyday work, good managerial skills, the ability to influence one's own work, training opportunities, concern for health and work ability, and permanent employment.

FIOH's new approach to developing work life

FIOH turned a new page in history at the beginning of 2006. In accordance with our new strategy, we began to develop solutions for improving occupational health and well-being together with our customers and partners; in this way promoting work safety and health as part of good living, and laying a solid foundation for Finnish work life. We also restructured our organization.

We act as a bridge between science and work life: we provide our customers with approaches and operational methods based on researched knowledge, at the same time surveying any needs that arise in work life. The focus of our activities is now shifting from solving problems to developing positive preventive resources.

In the name of social innovation, we set up two Theme Areas, which search for solutions to highly topical problems. The Work and Life Course Theme develops methods for helping Finns engage in work life and extend their careers. The Good Indoor Environment Theme, on the other hand, studies the indoor environment of workplaces and looks at how to take into account users' needs when planning workspaces. It focuses on proactively preventing problems as well as solving existing ones.

Our two Units of Excellence continued searching for new scientific knowledge. In a few years' time, we will be wiser as to the factors affecting the emergence of and deterioration in occupational and work-related allergies. We will also be more aware of which work-related psychosocial factors negatively affect health and which promote health. This will provide us with new tools for promoting the health of the ageing working population.

Chemicals were also high on the agenda. We organized a seminar on chemical and radiation exposure together with the National Public Health Institute and the Radiation and Nuclear Safety Authority. We also worked as co-ordinator and on-call service provider for the Centre of Expertise on Chemical Threats, initiated by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. This 24-hour advisory service offers authorities quick information on the hazards and health risks of chemicals. After long discussions, the European Parliament accepted the 'Registration, Evaluation and Authorisation of Chemicals' (REACH), which sets new obligations for chemical manufacturers, EU importers and companies which use chemicals. We prepared to provide companies with expert support in order to help them meet the requirements of REACH. It is in all our interests that chemicals are managed correctly, and that companies retain their competitiveness. We increased our efforts in developing the operational preconditions of small enterprises and entrepreneurs, and in work life research. We also published a wide-ranging database on its network services on the subject of working conditions in Finland.

On the whole, 2006 was a fruitful year for us. We enjoyed many publications, our advisory services were in demand, and a growing number of people participated in our training. Our research, specialist advisory and training services, and external communication covered the field of occupational health and safety as comprehensively as ever.

Collaboration and regional perspectives gained strength

In order to reach our goals, we need co-operative partners throughout the country: workplaces, occupational health care and occupational safety personnel, work tool and process designers, private and public sector decision-makers, and other research institutes.

We began to systematically strengthen our regional offices' links to workplaces. We carried out regional operational environment analyses, in which we outlined the specific characteristics of the provinces and occupational health and safety development needs. We thought about how best to support regional political goals, realize national programmes and maximize regional dynamism. On the basis of this, we chose fields of activity whose development of occupational safety and health we will concentrate on for the next four years.

In its work, the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health attaches particular importance to the occupational health and safety development of the following fields:

- commercial and private services, chemical industry, rubber and plastics industry and ICT (Helsinki)
- waste disposal, agriculture and forestry and connected industries such as bioenergy (Kuopio)
- forestry industry, transport (Lappeenranta)
- security, technology industry: metal and metal products (Oulu)
- construction industry , food industry (Tampere)
- municipality, social and health services (Turku).

Bringing the health perspective into all decision-making

Professor Harri Vainio, Director General: "We must promote the visibility of health in all policies - not just in health policies. Traditional sectorial divisions must be crossed so that discussions related to health, well-being, productivity and development of work life can be maintained side by side."

Health and mortality rate inequalities between population groups became topical: those who have a high income and are highly educated are in better health than those on lower incomes with only basic education. The factors behind these inequalities are, for example, way of life, working conditions, and cultural behavioural models; we have already worked on decreasing this gap through the TEROKA project, together with the National Public Health Institute and the National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health. Socioeconomic health differences are not only a Finnish phenomenon however; they appear all over the world. An expert on this topic is Sir Michael Marmot, whom we chose to deliver our annual Jorma Rantanen Lecture in 2006. It is already known that health services are best within the reach of those in the higher income bracket, and our research has shown that equality is lacking in the treatment of depression, for example, as male blue-collar workers are left without the appropriate medical treatment more often than others. It is important that this is rectified, as depression is one of the most significant causes behind work incapacity.

This year, we highlighted the 'Health in all policies' perspective. Health policy directly affects the health of all citizens, but it is also possible to both promote or impede health through other policy areas, as the sad consequences of lowering alcohol tax have shown. We must overcome traditional sector boundaries, so that discussions on health and well-being, productivity and the development of work life can take place alongside each other. When people are well, people are productive.

There are many examples of the strength of the 'Health in all policies' perspective. Finland received the Bertelsmann Foundation award for its persistent work in improving the coping at work skills, working conditions and employability of ageing workers, receiving special merit for its cross-sectoral collaboration. The force behind this was FIOH's follow-up study on ageing municipal workers (1981–1997), in which we demonstrated that by improving working conditions, competence and physical functioning; we can promote ageing workers' work ability, results and quality of life. The results of this study have been used as a basis for Finland's National Ageing Programme and its extension programmes, and have succeeded in bringing the ageing issue into political decision-making as well as into everyday work life.

Active collaboration with EU, ILO, and WHO

As concern for health, competitiveness and the attractiveness of work life is a current issue in Europe in general, the Health in all Policies perspective also raised discussion on the EU level. With the support of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, we carried out the 'Health in the World of Work – Prolonging Healthy Working Years' project, in which the views of a hundred European experts were summarized into four recommendations: Workers' Health in All Policies, The Healthy Enterprise, Accessible Services for Everyone, and Innovations for a Better Work Life. These were presented in July, at the EU meeting of the Ministers for Employment, Social Affairs and Health, during Finland's EU presidency.

We were also active in other areas of international research and specialist work. Through the EU Twinning projects on the development of the national institute of occupational health in Latvia and in the prevention of asbestos-related occupational health risks in Estonia, for instance, we were involved in developing the infrastructure of occupational health and safety. On the request of ILO, we prepared the National Occupational Safety and Health Profile of Finland, which describes the actors, indicators and development needs in occupational safety and health. We took part in launching the activities of the WHO Collaborating Centre on Mental Health, and in the operations of the WHO Collaborating Centre on Occupational Health, and were also involved in drawing up the WHO global plan of action on workers' health (2008–2017).

Sector research in transition

Workgroups set up by the Prime Minister's Office and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, were given the task of defining research and development policies and clarifying the present position of sector research. The discussions yielded ideas of a shift to state-owned companies, the purchaser/provider model or collaboration between universities. Whatever is finally decided, it will have a great impact on the research carried out in sector research institutes and universities.

Unfortunately, the role of sector research institutes as promoters of innovation and developers of society was not done justice in the recommendations of the workgroups. Their research-based thinking led to the development of practical applications taking a back seat, in spite of the fact that these practical applications are precisely the way in which we could genuinely develop Finnish work life and society.

To continuing co-operation!

We thank our co-operative partners and customers for the past year. We hope to continue to fulfil the expectations of society and work life, and can only succeed

in doing so with your help!

[⬆ Back to top](#) | [🖨 Print this page](#)

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