

Occupational health services – an ILO policy perspective

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Introduction

The ILO Occupational Health Services Convention No.161 defines occupational health services as services entrusted with essentially preventive functions and responsible for advising the employer, the workers and their representatives in the undertaking on the requirements for establishing and maintaining a safe and healthy work environment which will facilitate optimal physical and mental health in relation to work and the adaptation of work to the capabilities of workers in the light of their state of physical and mental health. Similar requirements for the provision of the preventive and protective services at the enterprise are defined in many national laws. To date, the Convention No. 161 has been ratified by 28 countries. Many countries use it and its accompanying Recommendation No. 171 voluntary as models for establishing requirements for the organization and functioning of occupational health services.

Initially, the provision of occupational health services has been carried out mainly by teams of specialists (occupational health professionals) set up under specialized institutional arrangements mostly at large enterprises in the organized labour sector. Later on, other models of occupational health services have been developed in an attempt to meet varying needs of a very large informal sector in which the model of “in-plant health services” was not feasible. Despite efforts of governments and legislators to extend occupational health services to the working populations, the average coverage figures are only 5–10% in developing countries and 20–50% in industrialized countries featuring a limited access of workers to such services.

Occupational health practice

The provision of occupational health services entails carrying out occupational health practice with the aim of protecting and promoting workers' safety, health and well-being, as well as improving working conditions and the work environment. Occupational health practice, however, consists not only of the activities performed by occupational health services. It is a multidisciplinary and inter-sectoral activity, involving in addition to occupational health and safety professionals, other specialists both in the enterprise and outside, as well as competent authorities, employers' and workers' organizations, standard-setting and enforcement bodies and others. Such involvement requires a well-developed and a well-coordinated system at the workplace. The necessary infrastructure should generally comprise all the administrative, organizational and operative systems that are needed to conduct the occupational health practice successfully and to ensure its systematic development and continuous improvement.

In its broadest context, occupational health practice should be understood as the activities of all those who contribute to the protection and promotion of workers' health and to the improvement of the working conditions and the work environment. These activities should not be seen as limited only to the practice of occupational health professionals. Infrastructures for occupational health practice should comprise all the organizational arrangements needed to implement a national policy on occupational health services, as requested by the ILO Convention No.161, to ensure its implementation at the national and enterprise levels. Activities of many bodies other than occupational health services, such as enforcement agencies, research institutions, educational and training institutions, non-governmental organizations, and tripartite bodies having stakeholders' interest in occupational health contribute to occupational health practice. Obviously, occupational health services are the core element that dwells in the centre of occupational health practice but the entire infrastructure of the national OSH system is critical and ultimately conducive to their efficient performance.

Investment in prevention

It is increasingly recognized that a healthy workforce is a prerequisite for the success of economic and social policies and a necessary condition for the achievement of sustainable development. At the same time, it is often observed that enterprises spend incomparably higher amounts of funds to compensate losses due to unsafe work environments in comparison with those that would be necessary to create and maintain safe and healthy working conditions and work environments.

The investment in prevention is meaningful from the economic point of view. Prevention reduces costs due to occupational injuries and diseases. It is estimated that the social cost of occupational diseases is two-threefold higher than the investment that would have been necessary to prevent them. The existing health economics studies and the experience in the field of occupational health confirm this assertion. Common knowledge indicates that prevention is better and less costly than treatment. It is necessary to define most feasible approaches in order to evolve new patterns in occupational health practice and to optimize the efficiency of the institutions and organizations concerned with the protection and promotion of workers' health and the maintenance of their working capacity. The areas of actions of these organizations should be broadened to aim at the total health of workers to provide both preventive and curative activities. They should address in a concerted manner disease prevention, workplace health promotion, rehabilitation, and workers' compensation. The renewal of primary health care (PHC), which has been recently put forward by WHO, convincingly demonstrates the importance of the provision of occupational health through PHC in addition to multidisciplinary health services in order to reach underserved working populations.

If this goal is to be achieved, it is necessary to expand occupational health services emphasizing the importance of their activities to society in order to help reduce the increasing social costs of work-related ill-health and disabilities. To ensure their efficient functioning and continuous development, countries are encouraged to adopt

comprehensive national policies on occupational health services in line with the requirement of the ILO Convention No.161.

ILO message

Despite all efforts by those concerned with workers' health, the numbers of occupational accidents and diseases are still too high. Public awareness of occupational safety and health remains generally low and all too often occupational health does not get the priority it merits. This must be changed and action needs to be taken to stimulate an accelerated response nationally and internationally.

To address this challenge, the International Labour Conference adopted the Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 2006 (No.187). The main pillar of the Convention No.187 is the formulation and development of national OSH programmes. These programmes are strategic time-bound policy documents that focus on specific national priorities for OSH, are based on analyses of the situations in the countries concerned, which should preferably be summarized as national OSH profiles. Such programmes should be developed and endorsed by the highest government authorities and have clear objectives, targets and indicators. Overall, these programs should aim to strengthen the entire national OSH system and to foster a preventative approach and safety culture that are critical to achieving sustainability of improvements in safety and health at work.

With this approach, occupational health services become an integral element of the national OSH system where their expansion is defined by national OSH policy. The development of occupational health services will therefore be closely linked to the development of national OSH systems representing infrastructures for the performance of occupational health practice at large through the implementation of national OSH programmes. This new approach, which is determined by the ILO Promotional Framework for Occupational Safety and Health Convention No.187, is the way forward

towards a progressive development of occupational health services in all parts of the world with an utmost goal to cover all workers in all occupations.

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