

**Statement on the monitoring, prevention and the compensation of
Occupational and Work-related Diseases**
UEMS, section Occupational Medicine

The world of work is changing

New technologies, globalization and demographic shifts have produced far-reaching changes in the world of work and **new challenges for the health and safety of workers**.

Europe has always been in forefront with regard to occupational health and safety, a fact which has resulted in detailed legislative framework. The Occupational Safety and Health Framework Directive 89/391 EEC on workers' health and safety marked some fundamental improvements in occupational safety and health (OSH), specifying minimum obligations as regards health and safety throughout Europe.

Occupational ill-health is a continuum from strictly occupational diseases to symptoms aggravated by exposures at work. All the entities within this spectrum should be addressed properly.

There is an urgent need for reliable data

Overall costs due to lack of proper safety and health were estimated to be around 3000 billion Euros a year in Europe. The incidence of many occupational diseases has decreased in the past decades.

However, the number of cases of **occupational diseases** in general appears to be on the **increase again**, in particular that of occupational cancers, musculoskeletal disorders and mental illnesses. Over 80% of years of life lost and lived with disability due to occupational factors can arise from illnesses.

Despite the remarkable efforts of e.g. EUROSTAT, EU-OSHA and the MODERNET-network, the statistics on occupational diseases are still vague and quite unreliable. Tracing of **new occupational risks** can be improved too, so that thousands of new cases can be prevented.

Reliable data are required in order to set appropriate prevention priorities. Current registration systems cannot fulfil all roles: prevention on a personal level, prevention on the company level, input for national/EU decision making, compensation of the injured. Accurate exposure data are difficult to obtain because work history is increasingly becoming more fragmented, it may involve working in different countries and/or self-employment. Furthermore, occupational and work-related diseases can manifest themselves like ordinary (non-occupational) diseases, leaving their true cause unidentified. Finally, as diagnostic criteria of occupational diseases are scarcely funded on evidence based research, the notification of an occupational disease can be haphazard. There is a **European need for registers** providing data with medical (non-legal) focus.

It is high time to improve prevention of work-related ill-health

Prevention of occupational diseases requires a higher level of ambition from the Member States and the EU authorities. Emphasis must be laid on aspects such as the 'culture' of prevention, the creation of related skills and a participatory approach. Research priorities and policy implementation need to be reviewed and revised, so as to reinforce the OSH social dimension and thus foster a broader concept of well-being at work. The challenges relating to global economy and the risk of growing social inequality need careful co-ordinated actions, including the protection of workers' health. It is therefore essential to **focus closely on prevention**. Measures to simplify regulations and eliminate unnecessary administrative obligations, which are detailed in the new EU Strategy, can be part of preventive policy. Nevertheless, safeguarding health and safety of the individual workers should be the main objective, also in times of economic difficulties.

There are tasks for Occupational Medicine and other medical specialities

Occupational medicine specialists have an essential and important role in the tracing and the medical assessment of work-related and occupational diseases. They need continuous **high quality education and training on occupational diseases**, including harmonized/consistent quality guidelines and algorithms for diagnostic procedures and unique criteria regarding occupational diseases.

Furthermore, other medical specialists must be educated appropriately, so as to increase their awareness of possible occupational diseases and to refer possible cases of work-related or occupational diseases to specialists in occupational medicine.

Help the victims: rehabilitation and compensation

Occupational diseases can have far-reaching social and economic consequences for victims. ILO-recommendations indicate that victims of occupational diseases should have access to **adequate rehabilitation and receive decent financial compensation**. Access to such services should be improved in many Member States, regardless of the legal/insurance system in force.

Conclusions: recommendations from UEMS-OM

UEMS-OM is dedicated and has the expertise to contribute in the advancement of prevention of work-related ill health.

We urge:

- policy makers to set health at work as a high priority and provide the legal framework (for increased enforcement, education, improvement of the effectiveness of occupational health practice) and commensurate funds for such actions
- governments to provide legal means, human and financial resources for building exposure databases and run competent inspection bodies
- trade unions to convey messages to workers what they can do for their own health
- employers' organisations to develop industry standards that can help prevent occupational ill-health and register valid occupational exposures
- non-governmental organisations to participate in and promote the development of evidence-based recommendations regarding the prevention and identification of occupational diseases
- universities to focus research on the development of practical diagnostic and preventive measures, and to train every health care worker on occupational health;
- occupational safety and health professionals to achieve multidisciplinary co-operation;
- medical personnel in the health services that provide curative care to consider work exposures for every patient.

UEMS-OM is a reliable partner in all initiatives within the frame of these actions and is ready to provide its expertise.

References

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