

Minutes of the meeting with the DG employment and social affairs

Date: 21th of October 2022

Participants:

1. For the Commission (DG Employment and Social affairs and Inclusion)

Charlotte Grevfors Ernoult
Maria Teresa Moitinho de Almeida
Zinta Podniece

2. For the Section of Occupational Medicine Section of the European Union of Medical Specialties (UEMS)

Fabriziomaria Gobba , President
Alenka Skerjanc, Past-President
Nicole Majery, Treasurer

The present meeting was organized following Commissioner Nicolas Schmit's participation in the meeting of the UEMS Section of Occupational Medicine in Luxembourg in October 2021. During the meeting the knowledge and expertise of the UEMS Section of Occupational Medicine in different fields in science and practice in occupational medicine were briefly illustrated. As a result, Commissioner Nicolas Schmit suggested to make an outline of what the UEMS Section of Occupational Medicine can provide, to present to him and his team. Such an outline was sent and, as a result, today's meeting was organized.

The topics of relevance discussed during the meeting are summarized here below.

The structure of the Occupational Medicine Section, that is part of the European Union of Medical Specialties (UEMS), non-profit association representing more than 1.6 million of medical specialists from all EU countries, was introduced:

- a. Occupational Medicine section is composed of medical specialists with a high competence in this area of medicine, all official representatives of EU countries formally nominated by the relevant National Medical Associations. The members of the Section of Occupational Medicine are covering all the components of occupational medicine, namely the Academy, National occupational medicine services, Compensation authorities, Labor inspectorates, Consultancies and Occupational health services (public and private).
- b. The competences of the UEMS Occupational Medicine section potentially cover all aspects of occupational medicine, from traditional but still relevant health risks like toxic chemicals and fibers, as asbestos, to new emerging occupational health risks like nanotechnologies, to the known, but endemic, musculoskeletal risks, to the increasingly relevant psychosocial risks. More recently the Section developed active contributions to face the multiple occupational consequences of the pandemic of Covid-19 that had a relevant impact on several occupational risks as psychosocial risks, including mental health, as well as regarding remote work and its consequences e.g. on musculoskeletal risk, and various other.

- c. The ambition of the UEMS Occupational Medicine Section is to have an adequate space to give specialized medical contributions to promote worker's health as medical specialists. If the general paradigm is the One Health approach promoted by WHO, the ambition of the Section is to play an active role as occupational medicine actors in this approach.

There are examples of previous strong positive contributions of the Section to the advancement of worker's health and of successful collaboration to other stakeholders. Just to cite a recent one, significant, on the request of DG Employment to the Central UEMS office in Brussels, the Occupational Medicine Section was appointed to prepare a comment to the possible proposed change of the European Union Working Time Directive that would affect doctors. The Section members collected research data and developed a document on the evidence of harmful effects of prolonged working hours on doctor's health (namely increased frequency of traffic accidents on the way home, increased frequency of sharp injuries inside prolonged working time and mental health disorders, etc.) that later on was also published as a review article in a prestigious scientific journal. The UEMS Council, representative of all European medical specialists, embraced the evidence presented by OM Section, and consequently expressed a negative opinion to the proposal of prolonged working hours for medical doctors due to the many negative outcomes observed, and the report of the Occupational Medicine Section was sent as such to the DG Employment. Accordingly, the Directive wasn't changed for the doctors.

According to the representativeness and competence emerged during the previous part of the meeting, the Occupational Medicine Section was asked about a possibility of collaboration to a future summit to be held in Stockholm in May 2023 where, among the topics, mental health at work is going to be specifically presented and discussed. A relevant aspect to be considered in this topic is that, despite the existence of a common legal framework, existing knowledge and available data on the implementation, and on the regulations in national practices, is currently largely incomplete, if not lacking. Considering this lack of knowledge the Section was asked the possibility to collect and supply data already collected and/or examples of good practices in different European member states, in order to give a contribution of knowledge on the further development of practical guidance in the European Union Countries where appropriate. The participants agreed that collaboration through the national representatives of the UEMS OM section would be helpful to the Commission services in this request, and a preliminary activity to positively answer to this request is ongoing.

In the following part of the meeting some particular traditional and new emerging occupational medicine problems emerged in the discussion, as that of the adverse health effects of asbestos, especially their long latency consequences even at low level exposures, and the difficulties inherited in the surveillance of the previously exposed workers after retirement, the re-emerging risk of silica, especially related to its use e.g. as a component of artificial stones, the new problem of occupational exposure to nanoparticles, and other, as well as the new knowledge on the risk related to night shift work. A high specific competence on asbestos, and on the asbestos related problems, is available within the Section, due to the presence of a leading expert in this particular field.

There are other occupational problems that emerged in the discussion some such as biomonitoring of exposed workers, and the scarce systematization of data regarding the evidence-based effectiveness of the monitoring of exposed workers (they are currently under specific consideration within the Section, and specific working groups is currently active in that topics).

Another topic that emerged during the meeting was the document, currently in an advanced phase of development, announced in the EU Strategic Framework on Health and Safety at work 2021-2027 "Guidance for the safe management of hazardous medicinal products at work." An important objective to be achieved is the delivery of the document among the largest member of potential stakeholders, and a widespread diffusion in hospitals to reach as many hospital workers exposed to these risks as possible. In the following discussion, suggestions regarding possible target groups and links to their organizations were proposed.

At the end of the encounter, participants agreed on the positivity of the meeting, that was productive, and the topic introduced, and the consequent discussion, are opening interesting and positive future perspectives.

It was agreed on the need of an active collaboration on the specific topics identified and, more in general, of a strengthening of further collaboration of the UEMS Occupational Medicine section on goals of interest to the Commission.

Luxembourg, 21th of October 2022

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