

## **INTRODUCTION TO OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND SAFETY**

Occupational health and safety is a discipline with a broad scope involving many specialized fields. In its broadest sense, it should aim at:

- the promotion and maintenance of the highest degree of physical, mental and social well-being of workers in all occupations;
- the prevention among workers of adverse effects on health caused by their working conditions;
- the protection of workers in their employment from risks resulting from factors adverse to health;
- the adaptation of work to humans.

In other words, occupational health and safety encompasses the **social, mental and physical well-being of workers**, that is the “whole person”.

Successful occupational health and safety practice requires the collaboration and participation of both employers and workers in health and safety programmes, and involves the consideration of issues relating to occupational medicine, industrial hygiene, toxicology, education, engineering safety, ergonomics, psychology, etc.

### ***\*Poor working conditions affect worker health and safety***

- Poor working conditions of any type have the potential to affect a worker's health and safety.
- Unhealthy or unsafe working conditions are not limited to factories — they can be found anywhere, whether the workplace is indoors or outdoors. For many workers, such as agricultural workers or miners, the workplace is “outdoors” and can pose many health and safety hazards.
- Poor working conditions can also affect the environment workers live in, since the working and living environments are the same for many workers. This means that occupational hazards can have harmful effects on workers, their families, and other people in the community, as well as on the physical environment around the workplace.

Overall, efforts in occupational health and safety must aim to **prevent** industrial accidents and diseases, and at the same time recognize the connection between worker health and safety, the workplace, and the environment outside the workplace.

## ***Why is occupational health and safety important?***

Work plays a central role in people's lives, since most workers spend at least eight hours a day in the workplace, whether it is on a plantation, in an office, factory, etc. Therefore, work environments should be safe and healthy. Yet this is not the case for many workers.

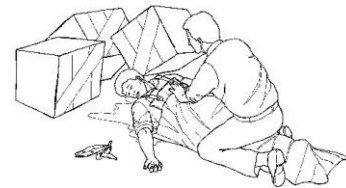
Every day workers all over the world are faced with a multitude of **health hazards**, such as:

- dusts;
- gases;
- noise;
- vibration;
- extreme temperatures.

Unfortunately some employers assume little responsibility for the protection of workers' health and safety. In fact, some employers do not even know that they have the moral and often legal responsibility to protect workers. As a result of the hazards and a lack of attention given to health and safety, work-related accidents and diseases are common in all parts of the world.

## ***Costs of occupational injury/disease* \$**

***How much does an occupational disease or accident cost?***



### **➤ *For workers :***

Work-related accidents or diseases are very costly and can have many serious direct and indirect effects on the lives of workers and their families. **For workers** some of the **direct costs** of an injury or illness are:

- the pain and suffering of the injury or illness;
- the loss of income;
- the possible loss of a job;
- health-care costs.

It has been estimated that the **indirect costs** of an accident or illness can be four to ten times greater than the direct costs, or even more. An occupational illness or accident can have so many indirect costs to workers that it is often difficult to measure them. One of the most obvious indirect costs is the human suffering caused to workers' families, which cannot be compensated with money.

➤ ***For employers :***

The costs to **employers** of occupational accidents or illnesses are also estimated to be enormous. For a small business, the cost of even one accident can be a financial disaster. For employers, some of the **direct costs** are :

- payment for work not performed;
- medical and compensation payments;
- repair or replacement of damaged machinery and equipment;
- reduction or a temporary halt in production;
- increased training expenses and administration costs;
- possible reduction in the quality of work;
- negative effect on morale in other workers.

Some of the **indirect costs** for employers are:

- the injured/ill worker has to be replaced;
- a new worker has to be trained and given time to adjust;
- it takes time before the new worker is producing at the rate of the original worker;
- time must be devoted to obligatory investigations, to the writing of reports and filling out of forms;
- accidents often arouse the concern of fellow workers and influence labour relations in a negative way;
- poor health and safety conditions in the workplace can also result in poor public relations.

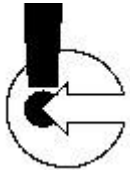
Overall, the costs of most work-related accidents or illnesses to workers and their families and to employers are very high.

### ***Health and safety programmes***

For all of the reasons given above, it is crucial that employers, workers and unions are committed to health and safety and that:

- workplace hazards are controlled - **at the source** whenever possible;
- records of any exposure are maintained for many years;
- both workers and employers are informed about health and safety risks in the workplace;
- there is an active and effective health and safety committee that includes both workers and management;
- worker health and safety efforts are ongoing.

Effective workplace health and safety programmes can help to save the lives of workers by reducing hazards and their consequences. Health and safety programmes also have positive effects on both worker morale and productivity, which are important benefits. At the same time, effective programmes can save employers a great deal of money.



### **Points to remember**

1. Occupational health and safety encompasses the social, mental and physical well-being of workers in all occupations.
2. Poor working conditions have the potential to affect a worker's health and safety.
3. Unhealthy or unsafe working conditions can be found anywhere, whether the workplace is indoors or outdoors.
4. Poor working conditions can affect the environment workers live in. This means that workers, their families, other people in the community, and the physical environment around the workplace, can all be at risk from exposure to workplace hazards.
5. Employers have a moral and often legal responsibility to protect workers.
6. Work-related accidents and diseases are common in all parts of the world and often have many direct and indirect negative consequences for workers and their families. A single accident or illness can mean enormous financial loss to both workers and employers.
7. Effective workplace health and safety programmes can help to save the lives of workers by reducing hazards and their consequences. Effective programmes can also have positive effects on both worker morale and productivity, and can save employers a great deal of money.

*Source: ILO International Labor Organization (modified)*