

2008 World Day for Safety and Health at Work

“My life, my work, my safe work: Managing risk in the work environment”

Pan American Health Organization

April 30, 2008 11:00am – 12:30pm

Workers' Health in the region of the Americas- Maritza Tennessee

Slide 1:

Justification

I would like to echo Dianne's words to welcome Dr. Devra Davis and all of you to the 2008 PAHO World Day for Safety and Health at Work. Today, the World Day for Safety and Health at Work is an opportunity to reflect upon and recognize the role and determinants of our occupation, working conditions, and workplace environment on our health, our families, and communities.

During our lifespan, we spend almost one third of our time and sometimes even more in the workplace. It is therefore not surprising that our work greatly contribute to our physical and mental well-being.

The workplace environment offers the triple opportunity to **p**revent, **p**rotect and **p**romote workers' health,safety, and wellbeing.

Slide 2: Connection with environment, work, and health

This painting is from Diego Rivera, a famous painter from Mexico. Many of you knows as an accomplished artist but he was also a passionate civil rights advocate for farmers and laborers. Through his work, Diego Rivera captured the complexity of the work environment as well as the connectivity with the external environment. As it is illustrated, the work environment is an integral part of our environment. The chemicals, and toxic contaminants used in the workplace, as well as the waste produced, when manage inappropriately, can pollute our air, water shed, soil, and food chains. This painting also highlights several the varieties of occupational risks

2008 World Day for Safety and Health at Work

present in the workplace: ergonomic, chemical, biological, psycho-social, and physical.

The relation between our work and our health has been demonstrated since 1700.

Bernardino Ramazzini, father of occupational health, wrote the first important book on occupational diseases. Through his work, he advocated for the implementation of protective measures for workers. His work was the seed to many social movements advocating for better environmental, health, economic, and social, protection for workers, and their families.

In today's world, Dr. Davis is one of the world leaders in ensuring that environmental and occupational health remains as a key political priority at the highest level. As you will see, she challenges us on common beliefs, encouraging us to think and perceive the situation from a different perspective.

Slide 3: Workers' health, Equity

A healthy and productive workforce is an intrinsic component of sustainable human development. Workers are the backbone of social and economic enhancement of communities, countries, and regions. Subsequently, the well-being of the workforce has implications on society at large.

Adequate employment conditions and healthy workplace are important requirements to prevent and reduce inequities among the population. This is especially relevant for the region, as Latin America has the most inequitable income distribution in the world. Inequities derived from employment translate into other aspect of personal life from their health, income, political participation, social inclusion, nutrition, and education. Those inequities perpetuates the cycle of poverty.

We have an important task in front of us as for reducing those inequities through the improvement of workers' health and safety. World Health Organization (WHO), estimates that globally two-thirds of workers are exposed to unsafe and unhealthy working conditions in which several categories of risk factors are pervasive. Many of those workers are exposed to carcinogens in their workplaces.

2008 World Day for Safety and Health at Work

In the region of the Americas, approximately 40-60% of the workers are in the informal sector. Workers in the informal sector are especially vulnerable as their working conditions and environment are often characterized by precarious and hazardous conditions, high turnover, poor stability and job control, as well as limited or no access to occupational health services. The lack of occupational and environmental standards increases their risk to be exposed to carcinogenic substances.

The globalization of the market has, in some degree; transfer the risk to many developed countries. Work processes involving the use of carcinogens, such as asbestos, and pesticide, are moving to counties with less stringent enforcement of occupational and environmental health standards.

Slide 4: Occupational Cancer

Today, we are here to promote health and safety in the workplace.

We also gather to remember the workers who lost their lives or got injured at work. We also recognize workers who suffer from occupational diseases, such as work related cancer.

At least 200 000 people die each year from cancer due to occupational exposure to carcinogens. Exposure to asbestos, silica, and hazardous chemicals at the workplace is responsible for 9% of all cancers of the lung, trachea and bronchus and 2% of all case of leukemia in the world. This number is an underestimate, it is only the tip of the iceberg as 5 to 10% of all occupational diseases are reported in developing countries.

In Latin America and Caribbean, a large proportion of workers are employed in agriculture, mining, construction, and the textile industry. Workers in those labor sectors are especially at risk of exposure to carcinogens at work.

Occupational exposure to silicosis and asbestos is daily reality for million of workers throughout the Americas. In some countries of our region, 15 to 20% of workers are affected by silicosis. Some of those workers are exposed to silica more than 30% of the working day, leading to detrimental health impact.

Slide 4: Asbestos

The World Health Organization says that about 125 million people are exposed to asbestos at work and that at least 90,000 die annually from asbestos-related diseases. Many of those workers are from our region.

Here, a worker describing how he would cover his face while working with asbestos. Offering him null protection against asbestos.

The WHO has launch an initiative for elimination of asbestos-related disease. Those diseases are completely preventable.

Slide 5: Occupational Cancer – Pesticides

Another important source of carcinogen for the region is the exposure to pesticides. Agricultural activities dominate the labor sector in many countries in the region. For example, in Honduras and El Salvador, one third of the total workforce is engaged in agriculture. Pesticide exposure is associated with several types of cancers including, but not limited to, Hodgkin's disease, leukemia, breast and lung cancer. Many children who live and/or work in agricultural settings are also exposed to pesticides at chronic levels (DCPP 2007). Parental exposure to pesticides before conception and during pregnancy increases the risk of the child developing central nervous system and brain cancer². This compelling evidence demonstrates that pesticide exposure permeates all aspects of life as it affects workers, their families and future generations.

The exposure to secondhand smoke is also another occupational risk for many workers. The rates of occupational cancer exposure are highest among workers whose workplaces do not meet the requirements for health and safety protection and do not have the necessary engineering measures to prevent the pollution of air with carcinogenic substances Workers who are heavily exposed to second hand tobacco

2

2008 World Day for Safety and Health at Work

smoke at their workplaces have double the risk of developing lung cancer compared to those working in a smoke-free environment¹.

Slide 6: Justification

As you can see we have a lot of work and challenges ahead of us; more and more workers entering the workforce, widespread socioeconomic inequities, the impact of globalization on communities, as well as high incidence of workplace injuries, illnesses, and diseases among other factors.

But those challenges are accompany by great opportunities to intervene and improve the situation on various levels. In the case of work-related cancer, we have the knowledge and tools to prevent those diseases. We must keep in mind that those diseases are preventable. We must now take actions towards “*Managing risk in the work environment*” as this year theme reminds us.