

## **CONFERENCE REPORT: THE JOINT 20<sup>TH</sup> ASIAN CONFERENCE ON OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH AND THE 5<sup>TH</sup> NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON OCCUPATIONAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH**

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The joint 20<sup>th</sup> Asian Conference on Occupational Health (ACOH) and the 5<sup>th</sup> National Conference on Occupational and Environmental Health was held from 9 to 11 March 2011, in Bangkok, Thailand. The joint conference was hosted by the Association of Occupational and Environmental Diseases of Thailand (AOEDT), which is a member of the Asian Association of Occupational Health and was supported by the Department of Diseases Control within the Ministry of Public Health.

This is the largest scientific conference for Occupational Health in the Asia and Pacific region and it is held tri-annually. The conference theme was “Moving Occupational Health towards Globalization” and the focus was on how occupational safety and health (OSH) professionals and services in the Asia Pacific region could address the new challenges of globalisation effectively.

The implication is that the Asian occupational health standard and quality must meet the global standards to protect workers’ health and safety in the workplace. The conference theme of “Global Health Protection” provided a broad platform from which delegates could explore universal challenges to occupational health and safety in an era of increasing globalisation.

### **Conference themes**

The critical global issues discussed at this conference included the following: Nano-technology and occupational health; global crisis and women’s health; occupational cancer; emerging occupational diseases; occupational and environmental respiratory diseases and Health effects from asbestos materials.

## **Objectives of the conference**

The objectives of the conference were to: enable the delegates to share knowledge of and experiences about occupational health-related issues; present and discuss delegates' latest research on occupational health and safety issues and promote collaboration among individuals and organisations in the field of occupational health.

## **PAPERS DELIVERED AT THE CONFERENCE**

Papers delivered covered the whole spectrum of the six themes of this conference. The 500 delegates who attended the conference represented different countries from Asia and the Pacific and from other parts of the world, including Africa. Conference presentations included six keynote lectures, five symposium sessions and 12 paper sessions. A total of 75 oral papers and 125 posters were presented.

The delegates' presentations addressed common occupational health problems prevalent in different countries. South Africa does not face unique occupational health challenges, as these are universal and some member states face enormous challenges.

The keynote address on "Moving occupational health towards globalization" was presented by Professor Kazutaka Kogi from the Institute for Science of Labour, Kawasaki, Japan. In his address, Prof. Kogi emphasised the fact that in occupational health, an increasing emphasis is being placed on advancing comprehensive risk management for diversifying working situations in globalisation. This provides occupational health and safety specialists with a unique opportunity for establishing commonly effective procedures in managing multifaceted risks in different situations. He concluded by highlighting the importance of examining good practices that involve action-oriented procedures to address occupational health issues effectively in different local conditions.

The author's oral presentation, titled "Health and safety conditions in small-scale garment Enterprises in Africa", took place on the first day of the conference under the track "Occupational safety". The presentation was based on original research conducted to assess the health and safety conditions in small garment manufacturing enterprises in Gaborone, Botswana. Findings showed that the occupational health conditions in the surveyed small-scale enterprises are unsafe and poor; thus predisposing workers to the risk of work-related injuries and diseases. Similar findings were presented by other delegates, based on studies conducted in similar settings in their countries. Globally, occupational health and safety conditions in small-scale enterprises appeared to be poor.

## **MOVING OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH TOWARDS GLOBALISATION**

In occupational health, increasing emphasis is being placed on advancing comprehensive risk management for diversifying work situations in globalisation. This creates a unique opportunity for establishing commonly effective procedures in managing multifaceted risks in different occupational health situations. It is useful to examine good practices that take action-oriented procedures effective in different local conditions. Good occupational health practices reported by delegates from different sectors of various countries were examined to elicit effective types of risk management procedures at the workplace. Criteria used for good practices were compared among those in Asian and European countries and among those reported from partners of inter-country networks of participatory action-oriented approaches. Support measures commonly effective for facilitating the spread use of effective risk managing procedures were also discussed.

Discussions during this conference indicated that various sectors have to rely on action-oriented approaches that can effectively address health and safety risks in various work settings, including small-scale and informal workplaces. Two typical types of effective procedures, common to good practices reported from different countries included proactive procedures focusing on immediate multifaceted improvements; and utilising participatory tools for facilitating group planning of such improvements. The fact that these two aspects are mutually interactive was emphasised. By applying the procedures and tools in a synergistic way, they can lead to multiple improvements that can effectively reduce existing occupational health risks.

During the closing ceremony, it was concluded that in globalisation, good occupational health practices reported from diverse work settings suggested the importance of combining commonly proven action-oriented procedures with localised participatory tools for effectively addressing multifaceted risks. It was hoped that the exchange of positive experiences through inter-country networks would accelerate the spread and use of effective procedures particularly, in small-scale workplaces.

The conference also provided social entertainment which enabled delegates to enjoy Thailand's hospitality, enriched with oriental culture.

The author was grateful and privileged to participate in this important international information sharing event, in which all inputs discussed were gathered to compile a resolution in support of the objectives of the conference.

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