Recent Problems and Prospects of Occupational Health in Japan

Occupational health activities in Japan were largely improved in many fields and the number of occupational accidents and diseases has been decreased for recent decades. However, many problems remain unsolved yet, and new ones are appearing as industry is changing. Recently, important problems of occupational health are shifting from those in manufacturing industry to service industry and intelligence-intensive industry. And occupational diseases like poisoning due to chemicals and metals, pneumoconiosis, vibration hazards and others are reduced but new occupational health disorders such as mental disorders, work-related musculoskeletal disorders, work-related diseases become more important problems.

In terms of classical occupational health diseases, we reported three cases of severe lead poisoning with wrist drop occurred in a small cloisonné ware factory in Japan in 1989\(^1\). And recently, a case of severe lead poisoning with wrist drop was reported from India in 2009\(^2\). In large-scale enterprises in developed countries, lead was strictly controlled or prohibited to use in order to prevent health disorders due to lead. But in small-scale industries and developing countries, many workers are now exposed to lead and some are seriously poisoned. In another example, the outdated technology in developed countries tends to be transferred to the less developed countries without adequate preventive measures. A rayon manufacturing plant was transferred from Japan to Korea and 4 cases of carbon disulfide poisoning were found in 1987. And more than 1,000 workers were certified as carbon disulfide poisoning till 2000. The plant was closed in Korea and transferred to China in 1994\(^3\)-\(^5\). Disparities in occupational health services for workers between developed countries and developing countries, and also between large-scale enterprises and small-scale ones should be reduced for occupational health for all as the slogan of ICOH. In terms of new occupational health problems, the number of suicide per year in Japan abruptly increased from 24,391 per year to 32,863 in 1997, and after that more than 30,000 per year of suicide continues according to statistics by the National Police Agency in 2008\(^6\). The number of attempted suicide is speculated to be more than 10 times of executed suicide. And the number of workers suffering from mental disorders is supposed to be very large. According to the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare in Japan, the workers who have anxiety or stress in workplace reached to 61.5% in 2007\(^7\). Some portion of suicide might be related to mental disorders due to stress in workplace. The workforce loss due to mental disorders is very huge and the mental health is one of the most important problems of occupational health in Japan. Many researchers of occupational health started to tackle mental disorders of workers and reported achievements\(^8\)-\(^12\). The staff engaged in occupational health were claimed to do best to prevent or decrease the mental disorders in workers. The intensive researches were demanded to make clear the causes, preventive measures, and proper support methods to return to workplaces. Activities of occupational health particularly in large-scale enterprises are improved in Japan and the number of the staff for occupational health increased. For example, the member of Japan Society for Occupational Health reached to about 7,500 in 2009. And the University of Occupational Health was established in Japan in 1978, and it has achieved many excellent researches on occupational health and provided many industrial physicians mainly to large-scale enterprises and contributed to improve occupational health. And the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health have served for occupational health under the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare in Japan, and have contributed to scientific researches on occupational health. However, the number of faculties and staff of occupational health in 80 medical schools in Japan tend to decrease in spite of large social need for researches for occupational health. The researches in the medical schools are demanded to write articles in prestigious journals to get high impact factors in order to get good funds and better positions. Generally speaking, the researches on occupational health are relatively difficult to get high impact factors and good research funds. Therefore, young researchers tend to hesitate to engage in the researches on occupational health. For example, the field surveys indispensable for occupational health need longer time and are relatively laborious, but difficult to get high impact factors. So far, many occupational health problems, particularly in small-scale enterprises without enough occupational health services have been picked up and tackled by the faculties of hygiene or public health in medical schools in Japan and these activities have contributed to develop occupational health and bring up many young researchers and other staff for occupational health in Japan. And in recent decades, medicine has been shift-
ing from cure-oriented to more prevention-oriented one. Occupational health is one of the most important preventive medicines and increasingly demanded from the industrializing society. And occupational health researches need the wider and deeper cooperation among many specialties such as medicine, psychiatry, engineering, nursing, chemistry, statistics and etc. It is requisite to bring up more occupational health researchers particularly in medical schools. The researchers of occupational health could organize many staff among different fields. In recent years, rapidly advanced molecular biology became much easier for researchers of occupational health to make use of the achievements. And that puts occupational health on common research basis and makes it easier to have good cooperation with researchers in other fields. Then, the researches on occupational health could be expected to be more and more attractive to young researchers. Moreover, the developed countries like Japan have responsibility to provide occupational health service including experiences, advanced technology and experts to the developing countries. More and more excellent researchers are wanted particularly in the medical schools in Japan.

References


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