Current Topics in Occupational and Environmental Health: Introduction

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Introduction

Physical, chemical, biological, and psychosocial factors in daily and working life may affect our health. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), "Occupational health deals with all aspects of health and safety in the workplace and has a strong focus on primary prevention of hazards." The Joint International Labour Organization/WHO Committee on Occupational Health specifically defined occupational health at its first session in 1950, and revised the definition at its 12th session in 1995 to the following: "Occupational health 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 amongst workers of departures from health caused by their working conditions; the protection of workers in their employment from risks resulting from factors adverse to health; the placing and maintenance of the worker in an occupational environment adapted to his physiological and psychological capabilities; and, to summarize: the adaptation of work to man and of each man to his job."

The WHO also states, "Environmental health addresses all the physical, chemical, and biological factors external to a person, and all the related factors impacting behaviours. It encompasses the assessment and control of those environmental factors that can potentially affect health. It is targeted towards preventing disease and creating health-supportive environments. This definition excludes behaviour not related to environment, as well as behaviour related to the social and cultural environment, and genetics."

"Occupational and environmental health" is an integrated concept of occupational health and environmental health. This is "the multidisciplinary approach to the recognition, diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of illnesses, injuries, and other adverse health conditions resulting from hazardous environmental exposures in the workplace, the home, and the community. It is a component of medical care and of public health—what we, as a society, do collectively to ensure that the conditions in which people live and work are healthy" (Levy et al., ed.: Occupational and Environmental Health, 6th edition, Oxford University Press, 2011).

Legislative regulations in developed countries have resulted in a reduction in occupational and environmental hazards, such as biological and chemical exposure, whereas psychosocial factors have become important issues affecting health. Recent studies have also indicated that low-level exposure to chemical substances, even at a "safe" level, may cause subclinical health effects. Globally, we face environmental disasters and environmental pollution resulting from industrialization, which often occurs when production processes are not effectively monitored and controlled. "Classical" occupational and environmental hazards remain a threat in developing countries. Education and research in occupational and environmental health are of great importance to all of us.