

CONCEPT NOTE

30 January 2022

33rd INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS ON OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH, ICOH2022

Global Policy Forum: Work as a key dimension of the COVID-19 pandemic: Sharing experiences and solutions in occupational health. Prediction, prevention and preparedness for emergencies at work with special reference to the risk of pandemics

Background

As the traditional occupational safety and health hazards are gradually controlled in industrialized countries, emerging and developing economies continue to be seriously challenged by them and we are far from being successful in their prevention and management. Simultaneously, new hazards at work have occurred, derived from globalization, the introduction of new technologies, materials, and substances, and new biological and psycho-social hazards. New patterns of employment, such as growing precariousness, distant, and mobile work settings, are a reality, along with the growing trend of “new economies”. It will become more challenging to anticipate, prevent and manage risks as the numbers of “stable workplaces” diminish and working life becomes more and more fragmented and unstable.

The traditional systems for occupational health and safety no longer support systematic safety and health at work. The COVID-19 pandemic, with increasing numbers of new virus variants, has spread in such a changing world of work with many workforces being employed in unstable jobs without support from occupational health and safety systems and infrastructure. The health systems throughout the world (including industrialized countries) were unprepared for prevention and management of the ongoing pandemic that by 21 January 2022 has infected a total of 340 million people and caused 5.57 million fatalities (WHO 2022, <https://covid19.who.int/>). Though several effective vaccines have been developed at record speed, almost two years after the beginning of the pandemic about half of the world population is still not fully vaccinated (Our World in Data 2022, <https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations>). In particular, the omicron variant of the virus spreads extremely quickly and vaccination programs lag behind. This means that the pandemic is far from being over. Working people, comprising 50-70% of the total population, are at the centre of the COVID-19 crisis. The pandemic has dramatically changed the conditions of work and employment. Part of the global workforce has been able to transition to remote work while for many this choice has not been possible. Workers in the health sector, aged care, other service occupations, construction, food industry, cleaning, transportation, police, customs, border guard, schools, and social service workers, covering a total of over 2 billion people worldwide, are exposed to COVID-19 infection risk in their daily work. Some of them may transmit the risk to co-workers, families, patients, clients, customers, or pupils. Several vulnerable groups of workers in the informal sector, migrant workers, and many others are inadequately protected and the management of the risk of COVID-19 is poorly organized.

Reports from various countries indicate that 15 to 35% of all COVID-19 infections originate from work. Health workers and emergency response (ER) workers are among the top ten high-risk occupations. Depending on the country, 5 to 30% of confirmed COVID-19 infections are registered among health workers and related occupations. Workers in ER services and health workers are at the frontline of the risk of COVID-19 and dealing with emergencies puts them at high risk of severe disease and death in performing their work. COVID-19 has caused, and continues to cause, enormous loss of health and damage to the economy in all countries. Sustaining workability and ensuring a safe return to work of the workforce is critical for rectifying these global health, economic and social crises. Despite the impressive and ongoing efforts by WHO and governments in the management of the COVID-19 crisis and efforts to protect health workers and the general population, the majority of the global 3.5 billion working population, including many workers at high risk of COVID-19 and vulnerable groups in the community, continue to lack the necessary protection from COVID-19 infection.

The world was not sufficiently prepared for the COVID-19 pandemic risk; not in the industrialized world and even less so in developing countries. Fortunately, thanks to well-developed virology research and intensive international R&D collaboration, vaccine development has been fast-tracked at an unprecedented rate. For other preventive strategies, the world was largely unprepared, particularly the world of work. New strategies and methods are needed for effective management of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic in working life, and for anticipation of, and preparedness for, possible future pandemics and other unexpected or evolving emergencies. Sustainable mechanisms and infrastructure need to be developed to strengthen the preparedness of health service systems; public transportation practices; measures for the management of

mass movements and related human contacts; measures, facilities and materials for personal protection and hygiene; and preventive and protective measures at workplaces.

For the earliest possible prevention, research and practical methods for the anticipation of potential future pandemics and other emergencies are needed, as well as preparedness for effective response. Training and education for preparedness in government, the public sector, enterprises, and workplaces are needed at all levels from top management to shopfloor level. Effective and resilient anticipatory and risk surveillance systems, with broad coverage, must be developed and continually maintained. The management of the pandemic risk at work needs efficient and effective occupational health services, competent personnel, and the necessary facilities. Today, occupational health services cover less than 20% of the global workforce.

Preparedness is not only needed for the risk of pandemics but also for several other types of emergencies. According to ILO estimates, 380,000 workers die every year from occupational accidents and 2.4 million from work-related diseases giving a total annual toll of 2.78 million fatalities among workers, including individual accidents and major industrial catastrophes. Every year about 60,000 people die on average from natural disasters and the variation in rates is wide, numbering hundreds of thousands in extreme cases. Emergency and first response staff, including frontline health workers, are typically exposed to the highest risk in such emergencies.

Scope and purpose of the Forum

The ICOH and the ICOH2022 Organizers have decided to convene a **Global Policy Forum** as an important component and highlight of the ICOH2022 Congress. The Forum is themed 'Work as a key dimension of the COVID-19 pandemic: Sharing experiences and solutions in occupational health. Prediction, prevention, and preparedness for emergencies at work with special reference to the risk of pandemics'. Leading experts in the field of the pandemic and other occupational emergencies, researchers, and policymakers from international organizations and various continents will interactively debate the Forum theme with the Congress participants. Relevant policies, strategies, and practices for better prediction, prevention, and preparedness for occupational emergencies will be addressed. The main thrust of the Forum will be to discuss the practical implementation of policies and strategies and to translate research and expert knowledge into effective practice, to improve the preparedness for possible future pandemics and other emergencies.

The Forum discussion will draw from the lessons learned from experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and other major emergencies and outcomes in working populations. Strategies for priority actions and programs for a better future world of work will be formulated.

STRUCTURE AND AGENDA OF THE FORUM

Introduction

The Forum will start by providing a global overview of experiences from major emergencies and their effects on those in high risk workers with a special focus on learnings from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Statements and comments

Participants from different Organizations and regions will present their analysis of short- and long-term policy and strategy challenges in the prevention of pandemics and other occupational emergencies and briefly describe the actions for prediction, prevention, and preparedness planned in their respective organizations/communities.

The key questions to the Forum

The Forum will be asked to discuss and address the following five questions:

1. *Current situation:* What is the preparedness of the current working life and workplaces for major emergencies including pandemics? What lessons were learned from the preparedness for the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. *Future:* What are the main policy challenges and strategies that should be in place by 2030 for the prevention of occupational emergencies, including future pandemics?
3. *Prerequisites:* How should the occupational health infrastructure be developed in view of preparedness for pandemics and other emergencies that threaten health and safety at work?
4. *Training, information and research needs:* What are the needs for research, training, and education, and information for future preparedness?
5. *ICOH role:* What should ICOH do in response to the occupational health and safety emergency risk? What should be done in concert with other institutions?



Participants

Representatives of international and national policy-making organizations and occupational health scholars and researchers have been invited to participate. Participant representation has been balanced to include speakers from international and professional organizations, various health and research disciplines, and global regions.

Chair: Dr. Jukka Takala, President of ICOH

Participants:

ILO: Mr. Joaquim Pintado Nunes, Chief of Labour Administration and Occupational Safety and Health,

WHO: Dr. Ivan Ivanov, Head, Occupational and Workplace Health

Latin America: Dr. Julietta Rodriguez Guzmán, PAHO (until Oct 2021)

Oceania and the Pacific: Prof. Margaret Hellard, Deputy Director of the Burnet Institute Melbourne, Australia

Asia: Prof. Luong Mai Anh, Ministry of Health, Vietnam

Africa: Dr. Spo Kgalamono, Director of the National Institute for Occupational Health, South Africa

Europe: Prof. Sergio Iavicoli, Ministry of Health, Italy