

Partnership for Sustainable Healthy Workplaces

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This article introduces the themes of the 2002 Warner Lecture, to be given at the Annual Conference of the British Occupational Hygiene Society and British Institute of Occupational Hygiene, in Sheffield on 9th April. It is easy to design new policies and strategies, typically from a distance, but harder to make them work. In the case of national missile defence, commonly known as "Son of Star Wars", effective implementation appears impossible. In the case of what we might call "workplace health defence", real progress can be made using human, technical and financial resources that are available now.

Amid discussion of the impacts of globalisation and changes in technology, and the implications for the workplace, policy conclusions have often been drawn for governments (such as the UK government's "Securing Health Together" strategy for occupational health) or for work organisation in European enterprises (such as the European Commission Green Paper "Partnership for a New Organisation of Work"). There has been insufficient consideration of the new organisation of work of governments, international agencies and NGOs, and of professionals such as occupational hygienists. All too often those in charge of the current systems do not know how to change their own practices, although they urge flexibility on others.

The 2002 Warner Lecture will take an international cross- disciplinary perspective, illustrated from practical experience in the UK (with the UK Work Organisation Network), the European Union (with the Swedish "Work Life 2000: Quality in Work" programme and other European networking activities), European Enlargement (with the "Work Life and EU Enlargement" project), and in developing countries (with the "ICOH Network on Occupational Health Education in Developing Countries", WHO, ILO and UNESCO). The focus will be on implications for the future of the professional groups concerned. Professionals need to take their futures into their own hands, building new alliances, networks and coalitions in pursuit of common goals.

We can point to examples of innovative practical approaches in the workplace (including ILO programmes such as WISE and Saferwork), networks such as the European Network for Workplace Health Promotion, and a new initiative with World Strategic Partners, supported by Unilever and the ILO, in which I am involved, to develop a New Business Model for increased productivity through ongoing improvement of the wellbeing of an individual in the workplace. What these examples have in common is an awareness that conventional business models are not delivering a sustainable future, based on healthy workplaces. The emphasis in business tends to be on value chains, rather than on health chains, the consequences of each business process for human health. Accountants know how to measure cost, but not how to value human health and learning, and are failing to deal with the knowledge-based economy.

I will illustrate the new approach with a current example from Southern Africa, where the initiative came from occupational hygienist Gopolang Sekobe. The current HIV / AIDS pandemic has impacts in the workplace as well as for the health of individuals. An initiative by the Department of Health in South Africa, with the International Commission on Occupational Health, the National School of Public Health, the Nelson R Mandela School of Medicine in Durban, SADC Health Sector and WHO, is seeking to establish new programmes with occupational health and hygiene as core priorities. Dealing with HIV / AIDS in the workplace complements the portfolio of other programmes.

These examples have in common health professionals working together in new ways, empowered to use their practical knowledge and experience in a rapidly changing world of work. In the European Union such developments fall partly within the European Employment Strategy, which emphasises social partnership, and new Directives to improve working conditions are an outcome of the process of social dialogue. We need to add partnership between professionals and professions, working together across traditional demarcation lines and disciplinary divides. Health professionals of the world, unite! The future is at stake.

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