

***Address by***

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***At the***

***International Consultation on Healthy Workplaces***

***16-18 March 2011,  
SEARO, New Delhi, India***

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Distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen:

With great pleasure, I warmly welcome you all to the International Consultation on Healthy Workplaces.

During our “health promotion” campaign in the 1980s, “healthy settings” was an important movement worldwide and “healthy workplaces” were promoted within the context of healthy settings. With increasing industrialization, particularly in developing countries, it is now timely to revisit the issues relating to the promotion of healthy workplaces.

Colleagues,

Currently, worldwide, an estimated two million people die each year as a result of occupational accidents, and work-related illnesses or injuries. An estimated 268 million non-fatal workplace accidents result in an average of three lost workdays per casualty. An estimated 160 million new cases of work-related ailments occur every year. Eight per cent of the global burden of illnesses from

“mental depression” are also attributed to occupational risks. This is another alarming situation. These data reflect only the injuries and illnesses that occur at formally registered workplaces. It may therefore be the tip of an iceberg.

In many countries, such as those in the WHO South-East Asia (SEA) Region, most workers are employed “informally” in factories and businesses where there are no systematic records of work-related injuries or illnesses. Addressing this huge disease burden is a difficult task for national governments, as well as for policy-makers and public health practitioners.

We are here today to think collectively of how to prevent workplace-related injuries and illnesses, as well as how to effectively promote healthy workplaces or a healthy work environment. Workers need to be healthy in all aspects, physical, mental and social. Health issues and problems faced by workers have to be realistically and practically addressed through multidisciplinary and multisectoral efforts whereby “multi-stakeholder” involvement is necessary.

Development of healthy workplaces is important, not just for legal or ethical reasons, but also because we expect healthy workplaces to contribute to healthier and more productive workers. We should also expect healthy workplaces to create “wealthier businesses”.

WHO’s strategy on occupational health and the WHO Global Plan of Action for Workers’ Health make for a more “systematic” and more “holistic” approach to health of workers. Healthy workplaces need to be promoted by taking into account

also the role of health systems based on the primary health care (PHC) approach. Health systems, especially health-care services delivery, will provide necessary referral facilities for sick workers. The principle of PHC should always be applied for promotion and protection of workers' health, both within and outside the business premises.

This is rather different from the traditional "labour" approach under which the relationship between "work" and "health" is seen as an aspect of "labour relations". The "labour" approach sees the protection of workers' health as an obligation of employers, an obligation derived from a "labour contract" governed by legislation and labour laws.

Within the framework of the "labour" approach, "occupational health" and "occupational health services" deal exclusively with the "work-environment" and not with "environment in general" - the environment outside workplaces. At the same time, in today's globalized world, the relationship between formal and informal workplaces, between the workplace and the environment, and between the environment and health is getting more interlinked and overlapping. Factors outside the "work environment", such as lifestyles and family relations are increasingly becoming important determinants of healthy workplaces, as well as of productivity of workers at workplaces.

Although employers retain the "crucial responsibility" for protection of workers' health, other stakeholders can play an essential role in promoting the health of workers. Already, many business establishments are going beyond the

traditional “labour approach” towards the “health approach”. Enterprise communities are taking the lead among stakeholders to spearhead the “health approach” to workers’ health. There is a growing trend towards recognizing “workers” as “human resources” and as “human-beings” with “legitimate rights”. Also, there is now a trend towards realizing that healthy workers are a means to secure the “wealth of businesses”.

The WHO Regional Office for South-East Asia is pleased to host this consultation as the SEA Region has by far the largest number of workers who work with “informal” and “unorganized” occupational sector. The “holistic approach” to workers’ health can facilitate stakeholders to take health of workers beyond the responsibility of “health ministries” and into the domain of “multiple sectors”, including the most important sector, the enterprise community.

This is an opportune time for all of us to put together our experiences and wisdom in charting out a roadmap for moving forward towards promoting healthy workplaces, and healthy workers in the SEA Region.

With these words, ladies and gentlemen, I wish all of you success in your deliberations.

Thank you.