In this number

Work and health: a call for action

The celebration of the 1st of May has been this year devoted to the workers struggle for safer working conditions all over the world.

Committed to this endeavour, this issue of *JECH* is very much focused on occupational health. Several papers from Spain and Sweden highlight, with examples, the potential clues and the challenges in expanding the kind of research needed for modern occupational health.

The society of the 21st century, greatly shaped by new information technologies, has a conflict between the current high rates of occupational hazards and the widespread societal values of high quality and accuracy. Bad luck or random variables do not cause occupational injuries. The old objective of only compensate or cure the worker's illness has been overcome in recent years by the more ambitious idea of preventing occupational risks and promoting health at the work place.

Maybe more attention should be paid to the evolving complexity of the new forms of work force organisation. How is the globalised call for flexibility with its increase in part time jobs and temporary contracts affecting health?

Benavides and colleagues, using the information contained in the Second European Survey on Working Conditions, examine, for the very first time, the relation between the complex milieu of different types of employment and health related outcomes. Their study includes data for all the 15 members states of the European Union. Their findings could be the starting point of a new research field, as the authors mention "suggestive patterns worthy of further exploration have been found". What is interesting is as Benavides *et al* point out that the pattern is very consistent across countries. Similarly, the observations of Aronsson and colleagues, using an empirical cross sectional study, confirm that sickness presenteeism is also related to working conditions.

In a challenging editorial, Ana Garcia comments on the study by Vahtera *et al* about sickness absence and robustly encourages the need for action oriented research. Using the results of the study, she highlights this essential point. Everyone who works in occupational health is aware that most of the preventive measures currently in practice have not been properly evaluated. Do we have an evidence based

occupational health? There is clearly a lack of scientific information on the effectiveness and efficiency of the programmes implemented at the work place.

The study by Vahtera *et al* also provides an overview of the actual and potential ways on how psychosocial factors could contribute to the deterioration of the working environment. Usually the debate on the prevention of occupational problems is mainly related to physical injuries, thus ignoring psychosocial damage. But if we wish to have an influence on the health of employees, we should begin taking seriously into account these kind of risks systematically. Psychosocial risks, probably, do not kill us immediately but they do not let us feel a good level of health. We should keep in mind that about almost half of the working population are employed in the tertiary sector, spending almost a third of the day indoors.

Åke Thörn also tackles indoor hazards in his paper about the sick building syndrome: "there is a need for the application of integrated psychosocial and biomedical perspectives". This paper also approaches in an innovative way the methodological difficulties related to associations between mild symptoms and low level of exposure. Quantitative as well as qualitative methods are combined in his paper resulting in a convincing account on how to manage the often elusive cases of sick building syndromes. Case studies are rarely published in the public health and occupational health literature resulting in practitioners all over the world reinventing everyday the wheel. In the particular case of occupational health case studies are even more important in so far as there are often just a few workers exposed to certain risks.

We encourage our readers, for the 1 May 2001, to submit more papers and so contribute to making our work place, a healthier place as an elementary right of every citizen. A place where we can develop ourselves as persons and not a place to become ill.

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