The role of professional bodies in occupational and environmental health in the Asia-Pacific region

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Acknowledges that professional associations and colleges and similar bodies have played a major part in the development of occupational and environmental health. Some notable bodies exist at both the national and regional levels.

Asian Association of Occupational Health

The paramount body in occupational health in this region today is without doubt the Asian Association of Occupational Health. It was founded in Tokyo in 1956 in conjunction with the first Asian Conference of Occupational Health. At that conference only seven countries were represented. They were Burma, China, India, Indonesia, Japan, the Philippines and Thailand (Phoon, 1982).

Since then, the triennial Asian Conferences on Occupational Health have attracted large numbers of participants. For example, the tenth such conference, held in Singapore in 1982, attracted more than 500 participants from approximately 30 countries who presented nearly 200 scientific papers. In recent times the Xth conference was probably the best attended, but the XIth (in Manila), XIIth (in Bangkok) and XIIIth (in Beijing) conferences also attracted many participants and excellent papers.

In addition to holding triennial conferences, the Asian Association of Occupational Health has activities delivered through a number of technical committees. The Technical Committee on Education and Training, for instance, carried out a survey of that subject in the Asia-Pacific region, while the Technical Committee on Research conducted three multi-country research projects in the 1980s through funds provided by the International Development Research Centre in Canada. The first project was a study of the occupational health services, educational and research programmes of eight developing countries/territories. Those countries were Hong Kong, Indonesia, Korea, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Sri Lanka and Thailand. The findings were published as a monograph, “Occupational Health in developing countries in Asia”, by the Southeast Asian Medical Information Centre in Japan in 1985.

Another research project related to the occupational health of pesticides. Four countries, Thailand, Malaysia, Sri Lanka and Indonesia, participated. The third research project focused on small-scale industries in the Philippines, Korea, Hong Kong and Singapore (Phoon, 1992).

In 1982 a President’s Prize for Young Scientist was inaugurated, and awarded at each Asian conference since. The recipients to date have come once from Thailand, once from Hong Kong, twice from China, and once from Australia.

National professional bodies

The constituent members of the Asian Association of Occupational Health are usually the peak professional bodies in that discipline in their respective countries. These national bodies are often pioneers for developing training and services in occupational health. They mount information and educational programmes. They lobby governments to develop more occupational health and safety facilities. Sometimes they initiate occupational health services themselves. The Philippines Occupational and Industrial Medicine Association, the Indian Industrial Medicine Association, and the Malaysian Occupational Medicine Association are but a few examples of national professional bodies delivering formal courses of training, particularly to physicians. There are very few national bodies in environmental health as such, but several public health associations, which cover environmental health interests.

Professional colleges

Professional colleges or their equivalents often take on the responsibility of developing or supervising training and standards of occupational health in their respective countries. For example, the Australasian College of Occupational Medicine (later renamed and reconstituted as the Australasian Faculty of Occupational Medicine of the Royal Australasian College of Physicians) lays down the requirements for the four-year training of occupational physicians. Its censors check the progress of trainees periodically. It also conducts the examination which marks the completion of their training. In addition, the faculty also sets and monitors ethical standards and runs a programme of continuing education with the award of points for the various activities in which a
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member participates. The faculty also has an International Relations Committee to promote closer collaboration with its counterparts in the Asia-Pacific region. In Australia, similar bodies look after the training and standards of other occupational health and safety personnel. The Australian Institution of Occupational Hygienists, the Australian Ergonomics Society, the Australian College of Occupational Health Nursing and the Australian Safety Institute exercise those functions for the different categories of personnel respectively.

In Australia, there are equivalent bodies for public health, the Faculty of Public Health, and Rehabilitation and Medicine, both also attached to the Royal Australasian College of Physicians. In many other Asian-Pacific countries, similar bodies exist which supervise professional training for occupational and environmental health, and rehabilitation (Royal Australasian College of Physicians, 1996).

National safety councils

National safety councils or their equivalents exist in many Asian-Pacific countries. The Japan Industrial Safety and Health Association (JISHA), for example, plays a leading part in initiating short training courses in occupational medicine, hygiene and safety. The Japanese Government contracts research study assignments to JISHA and provides assistance in specified projects through it, such as the Subsidy Programme for Safety and Health at Small and Medium-sized Enterprises and the Promotion of Comfortable Working Environment Campaign. Projects on company safety and chemical substances carcinogenicity tests in JISHA are also supported by the Japanese Government. JISHA has, in addition, wide contacts with a large number of industry associations and industrial health and safety organizations in Japan (Japan Industrial Safety and Health Association, 1997). There is also a very useful and interesting museum for the display of occupational health and safety equipment in Tokyo run by the same association. The National Safety Council of Singapore has an active Occupational Hygiene Unit which delivers several kinds of consultancy services to enterprises, such as audiometric examinations and monitoring of the work environment. A significant development in recent years has been the establishment of APOSHO (Asia-Pacific Occupational Safety and Health Organization) to co-ordinate safety activities in the region.

Other bodies

Apart from bodies which focus on occupational health and safety, there are many other bodies which contribute actively to promoting environmental health and the health of workers and workplaces. These bodies include institutes of management, personnel management and engineers, professional centres (federations of professional associations) such as those in Malaysia and Singapore, national productivity boards, trade unions, employer federations, associations of health professionals, and others, which often have occupational health and safety activities.

One noteworthy event during this decade was the establishment of the Chulabhorn Research Institute (or the International Centre for Environmental and Industrial Toxicology) established in Thailand under royal patronage. That Institute, which has recently been designated as a UNEP Centre of Excellence for Environmental and Industrial Toxicology, has organized many conferences and courses on pollution control and management, risk assessment and risk management in biotechnology, and other similar subjects.

References

Japan Industrial Safety and Health Association (1997), "Industrial safety and health organizations and relationship between them", Safety and Health in Japan, Vol. 19, pp. 11-12.

