

## **WONCA Special Interest Group on Workers Health**

### **Background**

Health and work are intimately linked, as formulated in the WONCA - ICOH Statement (Lisbon, 2014). Under good conditions work can have distinct positive effects on health and wellbeing. On the other hand, health and safety are threatened in poor working conditions, a daily reality for many workers around the world. Workers exposed to risks at work can get an accident or may suffer immediately or many years later of occupational and work-related diseases.

Failure to adapt working conditions to the capabilities of workers with a chronic disease may worsen their medical condition and deteriorate their ability to work. Poor health, injuries and disabilities prevent many from working at full capacity or from working at all. Having no work is a risk in itself for health and wellbeing, for not having an income, poverty for the family, a less purposeful life and social isolation. Yet, within Occupational Health Care, health and safety of workers are too often addressed without regarding their health outside of work. Similarly, health and safety at work is often ignored by Primary Health Care (PHC) while taking care of a working patient, their families and communities.

WONCA, the International Commission on Occupational Health (ICOH), WHO and others recognize that basic elements of workers' health care, including preventive services, is or could be provided in primary care settings. An important reason is the coverage of 70-80% of the global population by PHC, while only 10-15% of the global workforce is covered by expert-based occupational health services. Moreover, most workers with work-related health complaints like with asthma symptoms or chronic shoulder complaints will first visit primary health care. Further advantages of primary health care are the trust of workers in PHC, and the location close to where people live, and e.g. in agriculture, often close to where people work. Therefore the challenge to PHC is to provide basic forms of occupational health care, in good collaboration with expert-based occupational health services or with new forms of support by occupational health experts, online information and referral facilities in hospitals.

### **Why we need to work together on Workers Health**

More and more countries are experimenting with such programs. First evaluations show successes, conditions to fulfil, problems and challenges to solve. These new forms of primary care are especially important where expert-based occupational health services are mostly absent: for workers in low and medium resource countries, informal workers, workers in small businesses or in agriculture. The proportion of workers that may rely on PHC can be between 20 and 80% of the workers in a country.

To make progress education and training are essential to increase the expertise in workers' health of doctors, nurses, nurse practitioners, community health workers and volunteers in primary care, to recognize, diagnose, treat and prevent basic work-related health problems.

In addition, there is an urgent need to increase the number and capacity of occupational health experts and services for the support of primary health care, for referral tasks, and for specialized care for larger companies and their employees. Finally for such structural changes, programmatic support is needed from governments and social security organizations.

### **Historical WONCA / ICOH activities**

Against this background, there have been a growing number of activities between WONCA and ICOH during the last decade. The WONCA Europe conference (Kos, 2005) can be seen as a starting point, when Prof van Weel (WONCA) invited Dr Buijs (ICOH) to present studies about PHC and work; then

the presentations of Prof van Weel during the ICOH Centennial (Milan, 2006) and later many other WONCA and ICOH speakers followed at each other's conferences (Van Weel, Svab, Roberts, Van Dijk, Lopezl and Manning).

This has led to a growing mutual understanding and trust, and since the WONCA World conference in Prague (2013), including to regular meetings between representatives of WONCA and ICOH.

A landmark was the WONCA-ICOH Statement and Pledge (WONCA Europe, Lisbon, 2014):  
*The World Organization of Family Doctors (WONCA) and the International Commission on Occupational Health (ICOH) pledge to work with our partner organizations (including WHO and ILO) to address the gaps in services, research, and policies for the health and safety of workers and to better integrate occupational health in the primary care setting, to the benefit of all workers and their families.*

Meetings between WONCA and ICOH representatives in Seoul and Istanbul (2015) confirmed interest in a WONCA Special Interest Group. Finally a SIG *Workers' Health* was established during the 21th Wonca World conference in Rio, in 2016.