

Editorial




Navigating the crossroads: health, safety and wellbeing of workers in the face of traditional, environmental and emerging challenges

Inoka Suraweera*

Environmental and Occupational Health Unit, Directorate of the Environmental and Occupational Health, Ministry of Health, Sri Lanka

*Correspondence: isuraweera@yahoo.com

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2764-0417>

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Introduction

Work is crucial as it not only provides economic stability but also contributes to personal fulfilment, skill development, social interaction and the overall progress and continuity of societies. Half of the global population are working and in Sri Lanka alone, the workforce amounts to eight million. Workers operate within both formal and informal economies worldwide and are exposed to a multitude of hazards in their work environments.

First and foremost, the health, safety and wellbeing of workers is an ethical imperative that reflects the core values of a responsible and compassionate society. Every individual has the right to work in an environment that nurtures physical, mental and social wellbeing, fostering a sense of dignity and respect. It is an unequivocal truth that no one should fall ill as a result of their work. Dedication of a separate Sustainable Development Goal (8) to 'decent work' highlights the importance of ensuring the health and safety of workers in their workplace. The decision to include 'a safe and healthy working environment' in the International Labour Force (ILO)'s framework of fundamental principles and rights at work in 2022, further underscores it.

It is very well known that the absence of adequate health, safety and welfare measures in workplaces leads to severe consequences such as injuries, occupational and work-related diseases, fatalities, disabilities and prolonged suffering among workers. As per World Health Organization (WHO)/ILO joint estimates, nearly two million individuals lose their lives annually due to occupational diseases and injuries. It is interesting to note that the majority of workers die due to occupational diseases and not due to workplace injuries or accidents. Today, we stand at the intersection of traditional workplace risk factors and the trans-formative dynamics of the modern work landscape. It is imperative that we emphasize, now more than ever, the paramount importance of ensuring the health, safety and wellbeing of workers. A holistic approach that addresses both time-honoured challenges and the novel facets of the changing world of work is the key to fostering a workplace culture that values and preserves the wellbeing of its most valuable asset—its human capital. This editorial intends to shed light on the multifaceted challenges faced by workers, encompassing traditional risks, emerging complexities in the evolving world of work, and the often-overlooked environmental and climate-related

hazards. The health community's role is indispensable in addressing these challenges, considering the profound costs of inaction in ensuring the health of workers within this complicated landscape.

Traditional workplace risks

Hazards are ubiquitous in workplaces, with workers being exposed to physical, chemical, mechanical, biological, ergonomic and psychological facets of it in their work environments, underscoring the need for urgent attention in workplaces world over. The wellbeing and safety of informal economy workers have been a matter of serious concern world-over due to challenges in service delivery for them. Occupational diseases, stemming from prolonged exposure to workplace hazards, continue to impact workers across diverse work environments. The human toll of these traditional risks is evident, with individual suffering, disability and premature mortality, constituting the profound consequences of neglecting the health of workers at work.

Emerging challenges in the changing world of work

The emergence of a changing work landscape, marked by technological advancements, digitization, flexible work arrangements and non-traditional employment introduces a new set of considerations. Remote work, once a novelty, is now a ubiquitous aspect of the modern work environment. Ergonomic concerns, psychological risks, i.e. mental health implications, and the potential for social isolation require proactive strategies. The expertise of the health community is invaluable in ensuring that the benefits of the changing world of work do not come at the expense of the wellbeing of the workforce. Mental health, often neglected in discussions on occupational wellbeing, will require significant attention when considering the changing world of work. Stressors, burnout and the challenges of maintaining a healthy work-life balance underscore the need for a comprehensive approach to mental

health support for workers. The economic benefits of investing in mental health are substantial, with reduced absenteeism, increased productivity and improved overall job satisfaction.

Environmental and climate-related risks

Beyond the immediate confines of the workplace, there is a growing recognition of the impact of environmental and climate-related risks on worker health. As climate change accelerates and environmental hazards proliferate, workers face new challenges that demand the attention of the health community. Exposure to air pollution, extreme heat events and vector-borne diseases are increasingly recognized as occupational health risks. Industries such as agriculture, construction and manufacturing are particularly vulnerable, with workers facing heightened risks due to the nature of their work environments. The health community must advocate for policies that address these environmental risks, ensure adequate protective measures, and incorporate climate resilience strategies in occupational health frameworks.

Costs of inaction

The costs of inaction on ensuring the health, safety and wellbeing of workers are staggering, extending across human, economic and environmental dimensions. Neglecting occupational health risks inflicts avoidable suffering, disabilities and premature deaths on individuals. Moreover, the economic toll is profound and far-reaching. Increased healthcare costs are a direct consequence of neglecting health and safety measures in the workplace. The burden on healthcare systems escalates as occupational diseases and injuries place additional strain on already stretched resources. Absenteeism, stemming from both physical and mental health issues, contributes to decreased productivity and economic losses for employers and society at large. Furthermore, the long-term impact of untreated mental health issues affects the lives of individual workers, their families and the larger

economy. The societal costs of untreated mental health challenges, including the strain on healthcare resources, social support systems and the potential for long-term disability, highlight the urgency of prioritizing mental health in the workplace.

In the realm of environmental and climate-related risks, the costs of inaction manifest in compromised worker health, increased healthcare expenditures and the broader societal impacts of climate change. Unmitigated exposure to environmental hazards not only poses immediate risks but also contributes to long-term health consequences, exacerbating the burden on healthcare systems. Increased healthcare costs, heightened rates of absenteeism and diminished productivity all underscore the urgency of prioritizing preventative measures and proactive health strategies.

Strategic investments in health, safety wellbeing of workers

The role of the health community in shaping policies, advocating for strategic investments and fostering collaboration is pivotal for ensuring health, safety and wellbeing of workers. Comprehensive efforts of healthcare professionals, engineers, industrial hygienists, occupational, industrial and organizational psychologists, policymakers, employers, labour officials, environmental advocates and workers are essential to create a healthy and resilient workforce. Action should happen at international, regional, national and sub-national levels. Investments in preventative measures, such as conducting workplace health risk assessments including ergonomic risks, regular health screenings for risks related to work and advocating for welfare facilities are important,

among many others. The health community has a critical role to play in awareness-raising among workers, health promotion and introducing measures for controlling of non-communicable diseases at workplaces. Diagnosing occupational diseases and work-related diseases too need to be strengthened. Mental health initiatives, when integrated into workplace policies, create environments that support employees' psychological wellbeing, enhancing job satisfaction and retention.

The health community must engage in advocacy efforts to ensure the enactment and enforcement of standards that prioritize worker wellbeing and environmental sustainability. It is crucial to develop the capacities including soft skills among the health professionals to implement measures to improve the health and wellbeing of workers.

In conclusion, the role of the health community in upholding the health, safety, and wellbeing of the workforce is both crucial and expansive. As we navigate the complexities of traditional, environmental, and emerging challenges, the costs of inaction become increasingly apparent. A proactive and comprehensive approach, grounded in collaboration between healthcare professionals and all other stakeholders is essential to nurturing a resilient, safe, and healthy workforce. As we strive and commit for providing universal health coverage, we as healthcare professionals cannot ignore the health of workers. The time has come for a collective commitment to prioritizing worker wellbeing, recognizing it not only as an ethical imperative but as an investment in a healthier, more productive, and sustainable future for workers and the planet.