

WHO calls for prevention of cancer through healthy workplaces

Medicine

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Every year, at least 200 000 people die from cancer related to their workplace, according to the World Health Organization (WHO). Saturday is World Day for Safety and Health at Work. Millions of workers run the risk of developing cancers such as lung cancer and mesothelioma (a malignant cancer of the internal lining of the chest cavity) from inhaling asbestos fibres and from tobacco smoke, or leukemia from exposure to benzene at their workplaces. Yet, the risks for occupational cancer are preventable.

Lung cancer, mesothelioma, and bladder cancer are among the most common types of occupational cancers. Every tenth lung cancer death is closely related to risks in the workplace. Currently about 125 million people around the world are exposed to asbestos at work, and at least 90 000 people die each year from asbestos-related diseases. Thousands more die from leukemia caused by exposure to benzene, an organic solvent widely used by workers, including in the chemical and diamond industries.

The rates of occupational cancer exposure are highest among workers whose workplaces do not meet the requirements for health and safety protection and do not have the necessary engineering measures to prevent the pollution of air with carcinogenic substances. For example, workers who are heavily exposed to second hand tobacco smoke at their workplaces have double the risk of developing lung cancer compared to those working in a smoke-free environment.

"The tragedy of occupational cancer resulting from asbestos, benzene and other carcinogens is that it takes so long for science to be translated into protective action," said Dr Maria Neira, WHO Director of Public Health and Environment. "Known and preventable exposures are clearly responsible for hundreds of thousands of excess cancer cases each year. In the interests of protecting our health, we must adopt an approach rooted in primary prevention, that is to make workplaces free from carcinogenic risks."

Currently, most cancer deaths caused by occupational risk factors occur in the developed world. This is a result of the wide use of different carcinogenic substances such as blue asbestos, 2-naphthylamine and benzene 20-30 years ago. Today, there are much tighter controls on these known carcinogens in the workplace in developed countries. However, work processes involving the use of carcinogens such as chrysotile asbestos and pesticides, and those used in tyre production and dye manufacturing, are moving to countries with less stringent enforcement of occupational health standards. If the current unregulated use of carcinogens in developing countries continues, a significant increase in occupational cancer can be expected in the coming decades.

"The control of carcinogens in the workplace should be a key component of every national cancer control programme," said Dr Andreas Ullrich, WHO Medical Officer for cancer control. "To achieve this, WHO supports countries in developing comprehensive national cancer prevention and control plans, which are essential to prevent millions of cancer deaths each year."

To protect workers from occupational cancer, WHO urges governments and industry to ensure that workplaces are equipped with adequate measures to meet health and safety standards and that they be free from dangerous pollutants. The most efficient way to prevent occupational cancer is to avoid exposure to carcinogens. Stopping the use of asbestos, introducing benzene-free organic solvents and technologies that convert the carcinogenic chromium into a non-carcinogenic form, banning tobacco use at the workplace, and providing protective clothes for people working in the sun are among some of the simple interventions that can prevent hundreds of thousands of unnecessary deaths and suffering from occupational cancer.

WHO provides policy recommendations to help countries stop the use of carcinogens in the workplace, and provides health ministries with the latest information to frame health arguments and legislation to rid workplaces of carcinogens. Recently, WHO issued an official statement warning countries to stop using asbestos or face a cancer epidemic in the coming years. There are safer alternative materials to replace asbestos, for example using pine fibres in producing cement building materials.

In October this year, WHO with support from the National Cancer Institute of France will be convening a global workshop with participation of public health policy makers, scientists and major international stakeholders to elaborate recommendations for strengthening national and international policies on preventing occupational and environmental cancer.

28 April is the World Day for Safety and Health. Every year on this day, trade unions around the world pay tribute to the millions of workers who die, are injured or fall ill every year because of their work.

For further information on occupational health visit http://www.who.int/occupational_health/en/

WHO's position paper on the elimination of asbestos related disease's can be found http://www.who.int/occupational_health/publications/asbestosrelateddisease/en/index.html

For further information on the day visit the International Trade Unions Confederation (ITUC) at www.global-unions.org/pdf/ohsewPH_5Ad.EN.pdf

and the International Labour Office at <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/protection/safework/worldday/index.htm>