

The Leading Role of the Occupational Health Physician in Workplace Prevention and the Importance of Knowledge and Communication Abilities

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Occupational health aims at enhancement of physical, mental and social well-being of workers and supports the development and maintenance of their working capacity by preventing and controlling occupational diseases and injuries and by eliminating occupational factors and exposures hazardous to health and safety.

In the past, Occupational Health Physician (OHP) had and, further nowadays, has a leading role in this preventive activity where the results are strictly related both to the competent scientific and technical culture and to the communication abilities that he has got [1]. Specialized occupational health competence and knowledge of the working life and of the real needs in the workplace (e.g. knowledge on chemicals, physical, biological, biomechanical, psychosocial occupational risk factors at work, ergonomics, safety, work psychology, occupational medicine) are needed to provide primary health care to workers.

For a successful prevention the OHP needs scientific and technical knowledge of the sources, mechanisms of generation, transmission and magnitude of problems and practical skills for the prevention and control. He enhances the health of workers through preventive medicine, clinical care, disability management, research and education. As highly trained specialist, he has got a comprehensive approach that considers, at the same time, individual's physical, mental and social well-being, general health and personal development.

OHP is skilled at using the tools of preventive medicine (primary, secondary and tertiary) to improve the health of a defined population of workers and their families too, through health promotion programs and preventive strategies. Ramazzini's message is still alive about OHP's tasks: "offering preventing measures, being vigilant in trades and factories, making those who are suffering because of their trade give it up, studying the morality rate among the inhabitants near the workplaces because many of their deaths are caused by the former,

resisting the temptation to let blood in professional illnesses, not abandoning the chronically or terminally ill but rather studying them carefully so that something can be done to relieve their suffering and, finally, bearing in mind that even if they cannot be avoided, professional illness can be alleviated" [2,3].

As the connection between work, environment and health is more and more strong and the workplaces become more complex, physicians who practice occupational and environmental medicine play an increasingly visible role in preventing diseases and promoting wellness among workers. Moreover, nowadays, OHP has a critical position at the centre of virtually all health-related transactional activities in the workplace, understanding the needs and challenges of each stakeholder. He serves as an important bridge both inside the company, between employer and employee, and outside with government and all components of the public health care system. This bridge between the scientific medical community and the business-based employer community is strong and able to help prevention in the workplace only if the OHP has got good communication abilities.

His knowledge, skill and advocacy are very important, but his abilities in listening to and talking with the actors that play and build prevention (employers, employees, occupational health experts, government, public health services...) will play a crucial role in forming policy and implementing successful strategies in the workplace.

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Received September 26, 2013; **Accepted** September 27, 2013; **Published** October 01, 2013

Citation: Isolani L, Cecaro M (2013) The Leading Role of the Occupational Health Physician in Workplace Prevention and the Importance of Knowledge and Communication Abilities. *J Mass Communicat Journalism* S1: 001. doi:10.4172/2165-7912.S1-001

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