

Fact sheet on new Workplace Health strategy for Singapore

The Ministry of Manpower (MOM) and the Workplace Safety and Health (WSH) Council has unveiled a new national Workplace Health (WH) strategy. The strategy aims to create world class workplaces that are not only safe, but also address the risks from WH hazards. The key thrusts are:

- (a) Improving the comprehensiveness and quality of WH data;
- (b) Tackling known occupational diseases¹ (ODs) through targeted intervention programmes; and
- (c) Developing a holistic approach to the promotion of WH.

Background

2 The experience of the developed countries suggests that there is a strong economic case for adopting a more comprehensive and holistic approach on WH. In the United Kingdom, for example, it has been estimated that work-related illnesses cost employers up to 2 billion pounds (S\$4.2 billion) a year. This is about 0.8 billion pounds (S\$1.69 billion) higher than the estimate for work-related injuries.² Not paying sufficient heed to workplace health could retard our productivity and affect the pace of economic development.

3 Tackling WH issue is a challenge and calls for a differentiated approach. While the consequences in failures in workplace safety are immediately manifested as injuries or fatalities, the consequences of failures in WH hazard management may only become apparent years later due to the long latency periods of occupational diseases. Exposure to hazardous materials can have health consequences that surface long after initial exposure. At the international

¹ Occupational diseases are illnesses directly caused by physical, chemical or biological hazards in the workplace. It currently focuses on a prescribed range of 31 ODs gazetted under the WSH Act.

² <http://www.hse.gov.uk/economics/research/injuryill0506.pdf>

level, the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that each year about 2.3 million workers die from work-related accidents and diseases including close to 360,000 fatal accidents and an estimated 1.95 million fatal work-related diseases. There is therefore, a critical need to help stakeholders to recognise the importance of taking proactive measures to identify and mitigate risks in the workplace arising from WH hazards.

Improving the comprehensiveness and quality of WH data

4 The availability of accurate and broad-based data on WH is essential to developing a comprehensive and robust framework for managing workplace health. With the progressive expansion of the WSH Act to all workplaces, and with the changing age profile of our workers, tackling WH issues becomes a greater challenge. A broadened data collection approach will enable us to develop better picture of the key WH risks facing the population and to address the issue of under-reporting of ODs in Singapore. It would also allow us to better assess and proactively respond to the emergence of any new WH risks.

5 To increase reporting of ODs among employers and medical professionals as well as increase the number of workplaces with chemical and noise monitoring programmes, we will strengthen our monitoring and intelligence gathering efforts by (i) reviewing our enforcement framework for WH; (ii) improving existing mechanisms used in the collection and analysis of WH information and developing new ones; (iii) strengthening capability of WH professionals and other stakeholders in recognizing and evaluating WH issues; (iv) improving compliance assistance efforts.

Tackling known occupational diseases through targeted intervention programmes

6 In Singapore, close to 95% of ODs were attributed to noise induced deafness and occupational skin diseases. At the global level, the ILO has estimated that hazardous substances cause an estimated 651,000 deaths, mostly in the developing world. Asbestos³ alone claims about 100,000 deaths every year.⁴ These areas, hence, are areas of concern for us.

7 In the immediate term, we would put in place programmes to focus on capability building and enforcement efforts in these known problematic areas for WH. The four key areas would include (i) noisy work processes, (ii) work in confined spaces, (iii) work involving asbestos and (iv) hazardous chemicals such as toxic heavy metals and chlorinated hydrocarbons. We would extend these areas to target other ODs or emerging areas in the future.

Developing a holistic approach to promote WH

8 The strategy also highlights adopting a more holistic approach to WH and to support the work of the National Tripartite Committee on Workplace Health, which aims to bring down ill-health at the workplace. This is achieved by reviewing existing strategies and formulating new ones to make the workplace an important platform for enhancing the health and productivity of employees significantly. It is also in line with Singapore's efforts to promote the employment of older workers as our population ages. Helping our workers maintain, or even improve, their health at the workplace through comprehensive employment medical examinations will enable them to remain productive in the workforce longer. Reducing the incidence of workplace ill-health will also ensure that people retire healthier, and could help reduce healthcare costs in the longer term.

³ Asbestos is a natural mineral composed of fibrous silicates. It is used for the manufacture of building materials, friction and insulation products because of its high tensile strength and good heat and fire resistance. Inhalation of asbestos fibres can cause serious diseases such as lung cancer, mesothelioma (a cancer of the chest and abdominal lining) and asbestosis (fibrosis of lung tissues).

⁴ World Day for Safety and Health at Work 2009: Facts on safety and health at work.
http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_105146.pdf

9 The broad nature of WH issues requires close coordination both within the government and with the industry. Within the government, we will strengthen collaboration between the various agencies such as Ministry of Health (MOH) and the Health Promotion Board (HPB), given that WH issues fall within their respective scopes of work. One area of collaboration would be on outreach efforts to employers on good WH practices, to encourage employers to improve the physical environment that employees work in and to implement effective WH programmes to promote healthy lifestyles amongst their employees.

10 Please read more details in the strategy document “Improving WH Management in Singapore” available on www.mom.gov.sg and www.wshc.sg. An overview of the WH strategy is in Annex A.

Overview of Workplace Health Strategy

