

FACTSHEET ON NEW WORKPLACE HEALTH STRATEGY FOR SINGAPORE

The Ministry of Manpower (MOM) and the Workplace Safety and Health (WSH) Council unveiled the national Workplace Health (WH) strategy in April 2010. 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 injuries². 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 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

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>

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 94% 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 first few years under the strategy, the aim was to put in place programmes that focus on efforts in 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.

Developing a holistic approach to promote WH

8 The strategy adopts a more holistic approach to WH. To support this, the WSH Council also formed a Workplace Health Committee in February 2011. With the Committee, existing strategies are being reviewed to formulate new approaches to make the workplace an important platform for enhancing the health and productivity of employees significantly.

9 The approach and efforts are also in line with and support 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. To effectively help employees stay healthy throughout their working life and beyond, any WH programmes will also be extended to the whole workforce so that employees' health are managed from the point they enter the workforce in their 20's. This ensures effective management from the onset rather than problem solving only when issues arise in older employees.

10 The broad nature of WH issues requires close coordination both within the government and with the industry. Within the government, MOM and WSHC are collaborating with 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. For example, the Workplace Health Committee comprises of members across the two Ministries, HPB, healthcare providers as well as employers, industry leaders and the unions. 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.

11 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 can be seen below.

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

Overview of Workplace Health Strategy

