

An Invisible Workplace Peril

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Editorial

Many occupational hazards are relatively easy to mitigate once they are clearly identified. These are often of a physical nature and include exposure to noxious chemicals, excessive temperatures, excessive sound, poor ventilation etc. All of these undesirable states can be assayed and subjected to enforceable regulations defining the criteria that must be put in place in order to protect against them. However there is a more insidious factor present in many workplaces, difficult to quantitate and difficult to remediate. However, this less tangible factor is very potent in its ability to lead to slowly developing adverse long-term health consequences. While this problem often seems irremediable, it should not be ignored but must be confronted by those working in the occupational health arena.

This unseen yet commonplace condition is stress. It is most often encountered in work that combines low social status, poor security of employment, minimal income, and lack of empowerment to make all but the most minor decisions. Each of these factors alone can act as a sufficient stressor to lead to poor health outcomes. In combination, they have been shown to reduce life expectancy very significantly.

Specifically, stress can be a major contributor to cardiovascular disease, obesity, depression and diabetes. An attempt at remediation of these factors is by no means a Pollyanna lack of recognition of the real world. Improvements in this area can not only enhance worker health, but also are cost effective. An employee with a better level of inner content is able to work with more enthusiasm and efficiency. A higher degree of enablement can lead to greater self-respect and a larger contribution to the more efficient running of an organization. All this is well known and yet in many cases not put into practice. A long-sighted view of corporate effectiveness, which ensures that all employees are to some extent, stakeholders, can increase efficiency and the viability of a company. Workers with responsive leaders that encourage input will develop a high degree of loyalty and can often make very insightful suggestions.

Unfortunately, the old corporate structure still holds sway in many industries. Addressing this public health problem is a win-win paradigm and should constitute territory upon which occupation health workers can encroach and make valuable contributions.