

OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH

# Working to improve work safety

**T**HE World Day for Safety and Health At Work this year focuses on the prevention of occupational diseases.

The International Labour Organisation estimates that of the 2.34 million occupational fatalities every year, only 321,000 are because of workplace accidents.

The remaining 2.02 million deaths are caused by work-related diseases, which correspond to a daily average of more than 5,500 deaths. This is unacceptable.

The inadequate prevention of occupational diseases has negative effects not only on the workers and their families, but also on society because of the tremendous costs it generates, particularly in terms of loss of productivity and burdening of social security systems.

Prevention is more effective and less costly than treatment and rehabilitation.

All countries, including Malaysia, can take steps to improve their capacity for preventing occupational diseases.

In addition, there are about 160 million cases of non-fatal work-related diseases each year.

Certain well-known diseases, such as pneumoconiosis, remain widespread, while relatively new ones, such as mental and musculoskeletal disorders, are on the rise.

Based on statistics by the Social Security Organisation, there is a drastic increase in cases related to occupational diseases over the last five years.

Last year, 2,113 occupational diseases cases were recorded com-

pared with 515 cases in 2008. The total number of cases increased by 20 to 40 per cent every year from 2009 to last year. This is a matter of concern.

Among the industries or nature of occupations that are exposed to occupational diseases are manufacturing, transportation, storage and disposal, which involves manual handling or exposure to toxic or chemical substances.

The increase in cases related to occupational disease can be because of a lack of awareness about the danger when workers are exposed to the source of occupational diseases for long periods.

An occupational disease is not characterised merely by the disease itself, but also by a combination of the disease and exposure. The human cost is obvious.

The ultimate cost is life itself.

The global trend in occupational safety and health is towards a more integrated prevention concept.

Occupational safety and health is now regarded as a societal responsibility and countries are required to have a blueprint for building a prevention culture, with a framework for national and international prevention strategies.

Protecting workers' health requires a broader prevention approach, which places emphasis on the following:

**REDUCE** workplace accidents and occupational diseases through measures such as law enforcement, risk assessment and an occupational safety and health management system;

**PROMOTING** a prevention culture

by raising awareness involving stakeholders;

**TO** make occupational safety and health in education and training mainstream; and,

**PROMOTING** health and safety as an integral part of lifestyle.

To promote safety and health at work, organisational measures for accident prevention, motivation and behavioural change must be adopted.

There is an urgent need to apply the knowledge on occupational safety and health.

It is not enough to make safety a priority, as priorities change, but a culture, as it stands the test of time.

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