



UNION EUROPÉENNE DES MÉDECINS SPÉCIALISTES EUROPEAN UNION OF MEDICAL SPECIALISTS

Association internationale sans but lucratif

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UEMS SECTION OF OCCUPATIONAL MEDICINE

Position paper on the European EU Strategy on Safety and Health at Work

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1. Introduction

In February 2007, the European Commission adopted the Communication Improving quality and productivity at work: Community strategy 2007-2012 on health and safety at work (hereafter the Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) Strategy). This Communication underlined the major contribution that investing in a high-quality work environment can make to fostering economic growth, boosting productivity and creating employment. It also drew attention to the high costs of work-related accidents and diseases for businesses, social security systems and public finances.

All EU institutions welcomed the strategy highlighting the importance of an EU strategic framework to coordinate national policies in this area. The OSH Strategy expired at the end of 2012. On 31st May 2013 the European Commission issued a Staff Working Paper presenting the Evaluation of the European Strategy 2007-2012 on health and safety at work and launched a stakeholder consultation aiming at collecting the views of key players in the field of Occupational Health regarding the European Strategy.

The representatives of the UEMS Section of Occupational Medicine paid attention and passed carefully the document on EU OSH Strategy 2007 – 2012 and provided the Commission with a robust answer on behalf of the UEMS and stressed the importance of involving medical specialists in Occupational Medicine.

2. Taking into consideration health and safety at work: a challenging task

The UEMS Section of Occupational Medicine agreed that data on improvement was found in the document but there were also the areas where the goals of the past strategy had not been achieved sufficiently. They were concerned about the fact that almost no action has been taken in the field of occupational diseases and consequently on their prevention in the EU.

There is an important mutual relation between health and work. Work can have an impact on one's health as we observe in occupational diseases and work related diseases and health has an impact on work. Health is a condition to work and a meaningful work is a condition for good health.

There is need for the protection of vulnerable groups or specific high risk sectors. But which are these vulnerable groups? Youngsters, women, elderly workers, disabled workers, the sick people only? Everybody is a part of a vulnerable group sooner or later in their life. So we are sure that every worker should have access to occupational health service as a member of one of vulnerable groups

The UEMS Section of Occupational Medicine acknowledges that:

- There are differences in the current policy among the member states because their history of health and safety at work and the structure of their work force differ. But the differences should become similarities what is not possible without coordinating policies at EU level. UEMS Council has adopted the Occupational Medicine European Training Requirement so far!

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- All workers should have safe and health unthreatening jobs. They need to have access to health and safety professionals who should be organized in multidisciplinary teams and services.
- There are different lists of occupational diseases in the EU, different criteria and different recognition systems and this fact is very difficult to be understood in the same big economic Union. It is time to start to unify these criteria.

The UEMS Section of Occupational Medicine identified the following key challenges for the new OSH strategy as follows –

- globalisation processes, the complexity of the contemporary society including information,
- presenteeism,
- the new generation at work, communication and balance between elder and younger workers,
- start working after a (long) period of unemployment,
- gender differences, stress in private life and work,
- disabled and handicapped workers, mental health problems,
- outsourcing, self employed, managing staff,
- duration of working life, promotion of healthy and safe life beyond retirement.

3. Medical Specialists in Occupational Medicine play an important role in the implementation of Health and Safety at work

The UEMS Section of Occupational Medicine found that in the document there was no mention of the health professionals - ‘occupational physicians’ or ‘specialists of occupational medicine’ in searching more than 250 pages of the document.

Medical Specialists in Occupational Medicine all over Europe are very actively present among workers, involved in medical surveillance and risk assessment and management of their workplaces, professional rehabilitation activities and also in health promotion as members or leaders of a team. Occupational physicians possess data on health and also other problems of their workers and their researches are published in scientific papers. They are very much involved in solving occupational problems within a team with the other occupational health and safety collaborators.

Therefore, the UEMS Section of Occupational Medicine recommends that:

- To answer these challenges it is necessary to set priorities and goals, to define a time frame for the programme preparation, to define implementation and to define statistical report and evaluation.
- The new OSH Strategy should plan a strong collaboration between the stakeholders (the employers, the employees, the government and the professionals). The professionals should get a clear voice in the discussions, not only as experts. This can add a new dynamic to the social dialogue.

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- The stakeholders and the Member States should not feel that the EU will create plans, they need to be actively involved.
- In the past, occupational physicians were the protector of workers who were ignorant of the risks linked to their jobs. Today General Practitioners usually take curative care for (acute and chronic) sick workers but they often advice the workers only not to go back to work. They do not have either the knowledge about the risks of their work places or the experiences to suggest adaptations of the jobs to their patients. Specialists of occupational medicine combine the global knowledge of health and risk assessment of work places.
- The UEMS Section of Occupational Medicine suggests that a new EU Strategy or even a Directive on Occupational Health and Occupational Health Services may become the best instrument to achieve much better coordinating policy at EU level.

The representatives from UEMS Section of Occupational Medicine are looking forward to becoming actively involved in the elaboration of a new EU OSH Strategy.