

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



## Connecting Health and Labour

Bringing together occupational health  
and primary care to improve  
the health of working people

Global Conference  
"Connecting Health and Labour:  
What Role for Occupational  
Health in Primary Health Care",  
The Hague, the Netherlands,  
29 November – 1 December 2011



**World Health  
Organization**



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# Connecting Health and Labour

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Executive Summary

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What Role for Occupational Health in Primary Health Care»,  
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### Key messages:

- Workers' health is an integral part of general health and daily life
- Health systems should facilitate local strategies to meet workers' health needs
- In moving towards universal coverage, those at greatest risk or having greatest needs should be included first.
- When developing policies about workers' health all relevant stakeholders should be involved.
- Training in health and work should be part of all health care professional training
- Empowerment of workers and the encouragement of decision-makers are critical for the promotion of the health and safety of workers



## Introduction

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**1.** Currently, a number of countries are reforming their health systems based on the values and principles of primary health care to improve service delivery and cost-efficiency and to ensure equity. National debates on health reforms often touch upon the insufficient collaboration between health and labour sectors, the organization of preventive and curative health services for working populations, and their relation to primary care.

**2.** The Alma Ata Declaration from 1978 called for bringing health care as close as possible to where people live and work. Recently, the World Health Assembly urged countries to work towards

full coverage of all workers with prevention of occupational and work-related diseases and injuries (Resolution WHA 60.26 from 2007) and for implementing vertical health programmes in the context of integrated primary health care (Resolution WHA 62.12 from 2009).

**3.** The Hague Conference was part of a global process to improve coverage of and access to occupational health services as requested by the 60th World Health Assembly in 2007 and contributes to the debate that many Member States and WHO are now engaged in.

## Health and labour

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**4.** Employment and working conditions have powerful effects on health equity. When these are good, they can provide social protection, social status, personal development, social relations and self-esteem, protection from physical and psychosocial hazards, and positive health effects. The health of workers is an essential prerequisite for household income, productivity and economic development. Therefore, maintaining and restoring working capacity is an important function of health services.

**5.** However, hazardous working conditions and substandard forms of employment result in considerable burden of ill-health and injuries representing substantial costs for health systems and for national economies and perpetuating poverty.

**6.** There are many effective interventions for primary prevention of occupational hazards, for developing healthy work places and for maintaining and restoring functional capability. In spite of this, coverage of occupational health services remains low, and where they do exist they often fail to meet the expectations of workers and to provide access to the most basic preventive interventions and measures for protection against occupational diseases.

**7.** At the same time, the lack of work focus in the provision of health care may have a negative impact on people's ability to work.

## Occupational health and primary care

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**8.** Occupational health and primary care share common values that are important for the health of people and populations, but health services that adequately addresses work is not universally available for people. In particular relevant are:

a. the holistic approach, looking at individuals in the context of their life;

b. the interest in communities – be it work-communities or living communities – to secure equity and the involvement of those with greatest needs;

c. focus on improving individuals functioning (in work and other aspects of life) and not only on disease outcomes.

**9.** Currently, health services based on these values are not as widely available as is desirable. Closer collaboration between occupational health and primary care would enhance the opportunities to contribute to productivity and to extend working

life. This requires moving from a care oriented on diseases and health problems to care that emphasizes optimizing functional capability of individuals.

## **Towards an integrated approach for addressing work by health services**

**10.** A more integrated approach to occupational health and primary health care will yield a bigger impact on the health of people, than each can achieve on their own, to secure work-focused health care. How that integration works in practice, depends on national and local circumstances. Substantial global demographic trends (ageing, migration etc.), changing health problems and the changing nature of work mean that this integrated approach will become even more important in the decades to come. This will require more care to be provided, without the certainty of any increase the professional manpower. Important assets in initiating this collaboration are the experiments that can be found in a number of countries and settings around the world.

**11.** The following principles should guide further development in pursuing an integrated approach to occupational health and primary care:

- a. Workers' health is part of general health and life.
- b. Health systems should facilitate local strategies to meet workers' health needs.
- c. In moving towards universal coverage, those at greatest risk or having greatest needs should be targeted first.
- d. When developing policies about workers' health all relevant stakeholders should be involved.
- e. Training in health and work should be part of all health care professional training
- f. Empowerment of workers and the encouragement of decision-makers are critical for the promotion of the health and safety of workers.

## **Delivering occupational health in the context of integrated primary health care**

**12.** The following strategic directions for delivering

workers to curative and preventive health care

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