OCCUPATIONAL MEDICINE IN KOREA

What work takes place in Korea?

South Korea achieved very rapid economic development between the 1960s and 1990s, with a focus on manufacturing, during which time primary industry strikingly dwindled. Recently, Korea’s economy has begun to change from one that is manufacturing based to an economy that is essentially service based. In the last 20 years, small businesses have greatly increased in number and the proportions of working females and aged workers have increased to 49 and 27% of the total workforce, respectively.

What are the key occupational diseases?

Traditional occupational diseases such as chemical intoxication, noise-induced hearing loss and pneumoconiosis were the main compensated occupational diseases until the mid-1990s. However, work-related musculoskeletal disorders have recently become prominent and comprise about half of all compensated occupational diseases at the present time. Korea’s workers’ compensation law covers a wide range of work-related cerebrovascular and cardiovascular diseases, which form one-third of compensated occupational diseases, contrary to what is seen in other countries. Mental health problems and asbestos-related diseases are not major work-related health problems at present.

How is occupational health provided?

The Industrial Safety and Health Act mandates that employers conduct periodic occupational medical examinations and carry out workplace environmental measurement, and provide health management services. These are the three principal components of occupational health services in Korea. However, these occupational health services are provided mainly by private occupational health service institutions outside the workplace; very few workplaces have their own services. Occupational medical examinations for workers exposed to any of 177 nominated potential work hazards must be provided within paid working hours at the employers’ expense.

Who provides the services?

There are ~500 certified occupational medicine specialists in South Korea. Industrial hygienists in certified private occupational health service institutions provide workplace environmental measurement. Health management services in workplaces are provided by physicians, industrial hygienists or nurses either employed by the companies or by the certified private occupational health service institutions.

How is occupational health represented?

The Korean Society of Occupational and Environmental Medicine has almost 840 members including occupational medicine specialists and trainees. The organization provides training and organizes scientific meetings. There is also the Korean Society of Occupational and Environmental Hygiene, representing 300 industrial hygienists. Occupational health nurses are represented by the Korean Association of Occupational Health Nurses.

What legislation does Korea have that impacts the provision of occupational health?

The Industrial Safety and Health Act was separated from the Labour Standards Act in 1981 to secure the safety and health of workers and to improve working conditions and work environments. The law was sweepingly revised in 1990 and has been amended several times since then to expand workers’ rights to know and to participate. The Ministry of Labor of the central government takes overall charge of workers’ safety and health, and regional labor offices are responsible for enforcing compliance with the legislation.

What about research and education?

The Korea Occupational Safety and Health Agency (KOSHA), a government-sponsored agency established in 1987, provides major education programs and conducts research on occupational health. Schools of Public Health have occupational health education programs for postgraduate students. Occupational medicine specialist certification programs require 4 years of resident training in designated training hospitals.

What has Korea contributed to the advancement of the specialty?

Korea has but a brief history of occupational health as a science and practice. However, in 1996, Korean researchers achieved a world first when they reported a novel reproductive disorder caused by a new solvent, 2-bromopropane. Korean researchers have recently led manganese neurotoxicity-related research in welders. Furthermore, Korea has developed a unique occupational health service model to cope with various occupational health issues arising in the process of rapid industrialization over a very short period.

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