



TOWARDS A HEALTHIER FUTURE OF WORK

Dr Maria Neira

Director, Public health and environment
World Health Organization

The ILO Global Commission on the Future of Work called for fundamental changes in the way we work in the new wave of globalization, rapid technological development, demographic transition and climate change. Such changes may bring about new opportunities for improving the health of 3.5 billion working people and their families. A healthier workforce is an essential prerequisite for a brighter future of work and for a more sustainable development.

Everybody has the right to health, which is defined by WHO as a state of complete physical and mental wellbeing and not only the absence of disease and infirmity. Working people also have the right to health and to healthcare as close as possible to where they live and work.

Healthier and safer workplaces can prevent at least 1.2 million deaths every year, according to a 2018 WHO study. Many deaths and disabilities can be prevented through addressing major health threats at the workplace, such as stress, long working hours and shift work, prolonged sitting at work, work-related climate sensitive diseases, such as heat and cold stress, as well as workplace air pollution. The workplace is a key setting for action in many WHO global health initiatives on environment and climate change, non-communicable diseases, mental health, tuberculosis, HIV and other communicable diseases.

The 24/7 digital economy, long working hours, high demand and rapid change with low personal control can be devastating for physical and mental health and wellbeing. However, new frontier technologies and new ways of working provide solutions for classic occupational health problems, for example, by using robots for hazardous work, or artificial intelligence for monotonous, annoying tasks.

Most workers in informal and precarious employment, gig economy, care economy, migrant and

domestic workers don't have regulatory protection of their health and safety at work, occupational health services, and social security.

We want the future of work to close, and not to widen, the gaps between those who have full labour rights, health and safety services, regulatory and social protection and those who do not.

WHO and ILO are working together to develop a joint methodology and estimates of the health impacts of occupational risks based on the WHO burden of disease studies and ILO labour statistics. Such a methodology will allow us to assess and forecast the health impacts of changes in the labour force composition in the future of work.

WHO is working with countries to extend universal health coverage to 1 billion more people. The most basic interventions and services for safer and healthier workplaces need to be accessible for workers in all forms of employment, including in the informal economy, precarious employment, migrant workers and digital platforms. It is at the workplace where the Universal Health Coverage, the global goal of the WHO, and the Universal Labour Guarantee, proposed by the ILO Global Commission, can make a visible difference in the daily life of working people and their facilities, by connecting access to preventive, curative and rehabilitative health services to the right of all workers to health and safety at work. Health and labour policy makers need to join efforts to make this happen.

The current system of regulations, services and practice of occupational health and safety is a product of 20th century forms of work and organization of the economy – standard employment in big enterprises with social protection and regulatory control. This system is not anymore suitable for the new forms of work and work organization - it needs to evolve to ensure no one is left

behind. We need a reform of occupational safety and health (OSH) governance and services. The lack of collaboration between health and labour sectors in countries is a major obstacle for addressing the health and safety challenges from a changing world of work.

Globally, the proportion of people suffering from non-communicable diseases, such as cancer, respiratory, cardiovascular diseases, diabetes and mental ill-health, is increasing. In the future, working people will work with several chronic diseases. Therefore, as part of the measures to stop this epidemic, the Third High Level Meeting on Non-Communicable Diseases, held in September 2018 at the UN General Assembly called for providing healthy and safe working conditions, tobacco free workplaces, wellness initiatives and improving health coverage of workers. How can we make this possible? How can we make sure that frontier technologies are healthier, and working with artificial intelligence and robots is a source of pleasure and not a source of stress for working people?

We hope that the future of work will also be a good future for the health of all people. The jobs in the care economy will be increasing, no doubt. Some traditional jobs in the health sector may be replaced by robots and artificial intelligence, but no machine can replace human care and compassion. How will we prepare our future health workers with new skills to work with frontier technology and to do what technology cannot do, i.e. to be human? What will be the division of labour between humans and machines in the care economy? We have an ongoing collaboration with ILO and OECD on the future of health employment and inclusive economic growth and would like to see working conditions in the health sector to become more decent and more attractive for young people. The new jobs in the health sector need to be decent. This requires healthy and safe workplaces for everyone, everywhere – from hospitals to primary care, in cities, villages and fragile settings, and anytime – in daily work, and in public health emergencies.

We also need to be mindful of the environmental challenges arising from climate change, environmental pollution, for example air pollution. Many gig economy workers work outdoors and have no protection from air pollution and heat stress, this work is outside the scope of existing OSH regulations. The green jobs of the future also need to be decent, healthy and safe jobs. By combining health and safety at work with environmental protection, by linking human and environmental capital, we can contribute to a brighter future of work, a sustainable economy and a healthier planet.