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Prevention and Examination of Occupational Diseases in Vietnam

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Abstract

On researching occupational diseases in Vietnam, we realized that the prevention and examination of occupational diseases in Vietnam have not been performed regularly. The work still exists several limitations, leading to many people suffering from health problems due to occupational factors. These limitations include improper working conditions, environment, protective equipment for labourers; low record of occupational diseases (35 diseases); low number of

labourers examined and detected to be suffered from occupational diseases; and limited number of facilities qualified for occupational disease examination, etc. Based on the literature review, the authors have studied the regulations and organization of the prevention and examination of occupational diseases, thereby proposing solutions to reduce occupational diseases in Vietnam.

Keywords: Occupational Disease, Prevention, Examination, Vietnam

1. Introduction

According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), every year, in the world, about 2.3 million people die from occupational causes, of which 2 million people die from occupational diseases. Besides, there are 160 million cases suffered from occupationally related diseases. This is an ILO estimate, based on country reports and ILO surveys; however, the actual number is much higher than reported. Dana Howse *et al.* (2009) ^[2] pointed out 3 main reasons make actual number higher: (1) physician and diagnosis-related challenges; (2) workplace dynamics/ social relations of work; and (3) structural determinant. Although the number of deaths from occupational diseases is many times higher than occupational accidents, the problem of occupational diseases is not as concerning, because occupational diseases are more difficult to detect, and moreover, do not cause serious consequences (killing and injuring many people at the same time) as occupational accidents.

In Vietnam, according to statistics from the Health Environment Management Agency, Ministry of Health, within 5 years from 2018 to 2022, on average, about 3,000 new occupational cases are recorded each year. The total number of people suffering from occupational diseases is 28,000, which is estimated to be only one tenth of the actual number of patients. Occupational diseases affect the health and lives of labourers and create a huge financial burden for them, their families, as well as the whole society. To minimize occupational diseases and ensure the rights of labourers working in hazardous environments, prevention of occupational diseases is the most effective and less expensive measure. In addition, medical examination and treatment should also be focused to, on the one hand, identify the sick early, reduce treatment costs, and on the other hand, ensure fairness for labourers across industries and between regions.

2. Theoretical Basis

The Concept of Occupational Diseases

According to ILO's definition, occupational disease is a disease that labourers contract due to the influence of some harmful factors while working. These factors are permanent and long-lasting, causing a potential accumulation of disease in the body. There are many studies that have introduced the concept of occupational diseases; however, they are similar to the ILO concept which clearly states the causal relationship between disease and disease exposure. An occupational disease is a disease condition that is specific to an occupation or related to an occupation.

Occupational diseases and occupational accidents are considered "occupational risks" of workers and one of the criteria to evaluate the occupational safety and health situation in a unit, industry or a country. Occupational accidents and occupational diseases are similar as they both reduce health/work ability, affect the functioning of a certain part of the body, even cause death, but there are fundamental differences. Occupational accident is unexpected, arises in a short time, while an occupational disease occurs gradually and develops over a long period of time.

Causes of Occupational Diseases

Occupational diseases arise from a working environment with hazardous elements; therefore, the identification of hazardous factors plays an important role in detecting occupational diseases. Occupational diseases can be classified according to groups of causes:

- Diseases caused by chemical agent
- Diseases caused by physical agents
- Diseases caused by Biological agents
- Diseases caused by infectious
- Diseases caused by parasitic diseases.

On that basis, the ILO approved Recommendation 194, 2010, on the List of Occupational Diseases, which has 106 diseases and is classified as follows:

- Occupational diseases caused by exposure to agents arising from work activities: (i) chemical, (ii) physical, (iii) Biological and infectious or parasitic.
- Occupational diseases by target organ systems: (i) Respiratory diseases, (ii) Skin diseases, (iii) Musculoskeletal disorders, (iv) Mental and behavioural disorders.
- Occupational cancer
- Other diseases

In Vietnam, the list of occupational diseases includes 35 diseases, divided into 5 groups:

- Group 1: Pneumonia and bronchial diseases
- Group 2: Occupational toxic diseases
- Group 3: Occupational diseases caused by physical factors
- Group 4: Occupational skin diseases
- Group 5: Occupational infectious diseases

Confirmation of Occupational Disease

Countries prescribe occupational diseases and schemes for workers suffering from occupational diseases depending on their socio-economic conditions. There are two ways to identify occupational diseases:

- Based on the given list of occupational diseases. In this way, the list of occupational diseases is predetermined, and if workers suffer from diseases on the list and their working conditions are compatible, they will be confirmed as suffering from occupational diseases. This method facilitates confirmation, but its disadvantage is that if the worker is sick due to the occupation, but the disease is not listed, then the worker will not be confirmed as an occupational disease.
- Based on the worker's request for compensation. When the worker gets an illness, which is caused by harmful factors of the working environment, then the worker is confirmed to suffer an occupational disease. The advantage of this method is that the worker can be confirmed even if the pathogen has a new element; however, the worker must be proactive.

In order to ensure the rights of workers and overcome the disadvantages of the above two methods, countries often stipulate a List of Occupational Diseases and regularly supplement them when new diseases are discovered; for example, after the Covid-19 pandemic, many countries have added diseases due to Covid-19 infection.

3. Prevention and Examination of Occupational Diseases in Vietnam

3.1 Occupational Disease Prevention

Mr. Ryder, former Director General of the ILO, said that prevention is the key to solving the burden of occupational

diseases. It is effective and less expensive than treatment and rehabilitation. Therefore, the ILO is calling for the development of a "comprehensive and unified prevention model aimed at reducing occupational diseases, not just dealing with work-related injuries", and the organization itself has been working to develop international labour standards for the effective prevention of occupational diseases, and to promote their ratification and enforcement.

In Vietnam, in order to enhance the importance of occupational disease prevention, the 2015 Law on Occupational Safety and Hygiene clearly stipulates the responsibilities of the employer and clarifies the role of the fund for occupational accident and occupational disease in the prevention of occupational diseases.

1. Responsibility of the employer

- Employers are required to inform, propagate and educate employees on occupational safety and health, dangerous factors, harmful factors and measures to ensure occupational safety and hygiene at the workplace;
- Organize training for employees performing jobs with strict requirements on occupational safety and hygiene;
- Develop, promulgate and organize the implementation of internal rules and procedures to ensure occupational safety and health and ensure that the workplace meets technical standards and regulations;
- Fully provide employees with personal protective equipment when performing jobs with dangerous and harmful factors;
- Organize the assessment and control of dangerous and harmful factors at the workplace in order to propose technical measures for occupational safety and hygiene and health care for employees; implement decontamination and disinfection for employees working in places of toxic and infectious factors. Regarding harmful factors, employers must monitor the working environment to assess harmful factors at least once a year. The unit monitoring the working environment must have adequate facilities, materials, equipment and human resources. Regarding hazardous factors, it is necessary to regularly control and manage the technical requirements in order to ensure occupational safety and hygiene at the workplace and inspect and evaluate it at least once a year. The results of monitoring the working environment to assess harmful factors and the results of inspection, assessment and management of hazardous factors at the workplace must be publicly announced to employees.

In addition to prescribing the responsibilities of the employer, the Law also stipulates the responsibilities of employees in complying with regulations related to occupational safety and hygiene such as participating in training, using labor protection equipment correctly and fully, etc.

Although there are regulations on occupational disease prevention and examination for workers to ensure workers' rights, there are still some limitations in the implementation:

- In order to control dangerous and harmful factors at the workplace as part of their responsibility, the employer must make a record of working environment hygiene at his/her unit. This is a legal document showing the management of occupational hygiene of the unit, which is the basis for developing a plan for monitoring the working environment, improving working conditions,

preventing harmful factors, preventing and controlling harmful factors, preventing occupational diseases, in order to protect workers' health. Employers must annually monitor the working environment, implement the recommendations of the Working Environment Monitoring Organization when identifying hazardous factors exceeding the standards and take measures to solve the problem. If there is any possibility of an unusual incident affecting the health and life of the employee, the operation must be suspended and immediately reported to the responsible agency for timely responding.

These regulations require the employer to take great responsibility to invest, manage, fully and strictly implement the requirements on controlling dangerous factors and harmful factors to labours of the unit, and are even related to the ethics and social responsibility of the enterprise. This is not easy, especially given the increasing competition, enterprises must find ways to reduce costs and production costs, so many businesses are not likely to implement environmental protection solutions as committed or implement environmental impact assessment. The public announcement of the results of the control of dangerous and harmful factors for employees, especially those who are directly exposed to the environment with dangerous and harmful factors, also creates a negative psychological effect on workers, and at the same time, also puts pressure on enterprises to improve working conditions for them.

In 2022, there were 82,337 production and business establishments (collectively referred to as enterprises) under labor management, of which there are 31,090 enterprises whose working environment contains dangerous and harmful elements; the proportion of establishing occupational hygiene records at these enterprises is 27%. There are 5,000 enterprises implementing working environment monitoring; the total number of monitored samples is 944,129 samples. 80-90% of enterprises have not yet implemented regulations on monitoring or performed inadequately monitoring for harmful factors and risks of occupational diseases.

- The organization of training and ensuring the occupational hygiene environment in many enterprises is not in accordance with regulations. In 2022, the authorities carried out 1,725 occupational safety and hygiene inspections at 3,390 enterprises and found that 55 enterprises violated occupational safety and hygiene, and health care and prevention of occupational diseases for employees.

2. Regarding the role of the Fund for Occupational Accidents and Diseases

The Fund for occupational accident and occupational disease is contributed by the employer, with the contribution rate equal to 0.5% of the total salary fund of employees with a contract of 1 month or more. Responding to the ILO's message on prevention of occupational diseases, the Law on Occupational Safety and Hygiene clarifies the role of the Occupational accident and occupational disease Fund in financially supporting risk prevention activities. Annually, the Fund spends up to 10% of revenue on supporting risk prevention activities to reduce occupational accidents and diseases. Occupational disease prevention activities include occupational disease examination, occupational safety and hygiene training for employees.

In 2022, the expenditure from the Occupational Accident and Occupational Disease Fund for risk prevention activities (including occupational accidents and occupational diseases) reached 3.4 VND billion, accounting for 0.1% of the total revenue of the Fund. With 922.7 thousand businesses and 15.3 thousand cooperatives in operation, of which 40% are in the industry and construction sector - where the likelihood of occupational diseases is high, the average spend is only VND 0.5 million/unit, which makes it difficult to take preventive measures effectively.

3.2 Occupational Medical Examination

Occupational medical examination is a necessary activity to determine whether an employee contracts an occupational disease or not. The occupational disease examination must be performed by a specialized medical facility, which is different from normal medical examination. As occupational diseases often last for a long time, if employees do not have regular health check-ups or are examined to detect work-related diseases, it is difficult to detect these diseases or when detected, the diseases are already severe, affecting the health of workers and resulting in high-cost treatment. Therefore, the Law on Occupational Safety and Hygiene prescribes regulations on occupational medical examination as follows:

- Every year, employers must organize a health check-up at least once for employees or at least every 6 months for employees whose jobs are heavy, hazardous, and dangerous jobs or particularly heavy, hazardous or dangerous, employees with disabilities, minor workers, elderly workers health check-up.
- During the medical examination, obstetrics and gynecology examination must be carried out for female employees, and those working in a working environment exposed to risk factors of occupational diseases must be examined to detect occupational diseases.
- Organize health check-ups for employees, perform medical examination and detection of occupational diseases for employees at medical examination and treatment facilities, ensuring professional and technical requirements and conditions. Employers send the employee diagnosed with an occupational disease to a medical examination and treatment facility that is qualified for professional and technical conditions for treatment according to the prescribed occupational disease treatment regimen.

Because occupational disease examination is performed only at specialized medical facilities or hospitals with specialized occupational disease examination, the organization of occupational health examination for employees is still limited in terms of the number of employees and the number of occupational diseases examined. There are only 53 occupational health departments and 37 occupational disease clinics in 63 provinces. The number of health staffs in occupational health field is 623, of which 199 are doctors. Doctors working in occupational health are constantly changing from one department to another or moving to other units, so the number of doctors with specialized training in occupational diseases is also very limited, some of them lack of knowledge and experience to be able to diagnose occupational diseases. In 2022, there were 46/63 provinces

conducting occupational disease examination, with the number of workers exposed to harmful factors examined reaching 465,230 cases, of which 1,328 people suffered from occupational diseases.

- The list of occupational diseases has not yet included all occupational diseases of workers; currently, the list includes 35 occupational diseases (Covid-19 infections was added to the List of Occupational diseases in 2023), while the list of ILO Recommendations includes 106 diseases. Moreover, the number of occupational diseases for annual medical examination is not sufficient; in 2022, 33/34 occupational diseases were examined.

4. Proposing Solutions to Make the Prevention and Examination of Occupational Diseases Better

To better prevent and detect occupational diseases, the following measures can be taken:

- Strengthen communication and raise awareness of employees and employers. Widely propagate the danger of harmful factors and risks of occupational diseases to employees. Promoting propaganda has a great influence on reducing occupational diseases. When workers are aware of their own protection, they are likely to use protective equipment and take proactive measures effectively to prevent risks. For employers, they will pay more attention to occupational hygiene and safety, organize training for employees, etc. In addition, it is necessary to propagate the rights and procedures for medical examination of occupational diseases, occupational disease assessment and compensation for occupational diseases to employees. It is also important to raise employers' awareness of compliance with the State's regulations on the protection and improvement of workers' health.
- Strengthen the inspection, examination and handling of violations in the implementation of the law provisions on the prevention of occupational diseases and examination and assessment of occupational diseases. Regular inspection will help employers to fully and better implement training, labour protection, assurance and improvement of working conditions for employees. In addition, it is also important to strictly comply with the regulations on periodic occupational medical examination for employees, detect occupational diseases early and suggest employees have an assessment of the degree of working capacity decrease to enjoy benefits according to provisions of law.
- Organize full examination of occupational diseases in the List, for all employees working in hazardous environment, in all provinces.
- Standardize and invest in capacity building in terms of facilities, equipment and staff for health agencies to conduct occupational disease examination and assessment in the provinces. Strengthen training and developing capacity for occupational health professionals and strengthen cooperation between occupational health centers on occupational health in general and occupational disease examination and detection, in particular. The State should introduce policies to encourage and give incentives to the preventive medicine sector, including occupational health.

5. Conclusion

Only employees who are regularly exposed to harmful factors of the working environment for a long time suffer from occupational diseases, so if preventive measures are taken effectively and occupational disease examination is organized annually, many workers will be protected from occupational diseases. The cost of preventing and limiting risks is much lower than the costs to be spent when employees suffer from occupational diseases. Therefore, implementing prevention and examination of occupational diseases properly has great significance, both physically and mentally for employees, their families and the whole society.

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