



International Commission on Occupational Health - ICOH
Commission Internationale de la Santé au Travail - CIST

Founded in 1906 as Permanent Commission



The International Commission on Occupational Health (ICOH) supports the April 28 efforts related to ‘ILO World Day on Safety and Health at Work’ and ‘Workers’ Memorial Day’

This year on 28 April we find ourselves in the middle of a global pandemic due to the SARS-CoV-2 virus that causes the COVID-19 disease. Countries are in different phases of the pandemic; some are now in a very serious crisis situation and having to manage radically rising numbers of COVID-19 cases and deaths. Other countries are planning the next phases, in order to gradually and carefully re-open their economies to avoid further negative consequences, while maintaining adequate health protection. We need more international collaboration and sharing of learnings from previous pandemic experiences, not less.

ICOH would like to congratulate the ILO efforts on this World Day, in particular, the materials describing the specific issues related to epidemics and pandemics in the world of work, available at https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/safety-and-health-at-work/events-training/events-meetings/world-day-safety-health-at-work/WCMS_742058/lang-en/index.htm

ILO and WHO have actively guided countries, social partners, communities and individuals on limiting the pandemic in workplaces, communities and families. ICOH wants to confirm its full support for their leadership, guidance and invaluable practical advice, which have helped the countries to manage the pandemic. It is ICOH's wish that both Organizations can be provided with sufficient financial resources by the Member States, as an invaluable investment in the future of all.

Fighting the pandemics is a common goal. Control measures including the lockdown of workplaces must be lifted slowly, and with control. It cannot happen all at once. Control measures can only be lifted if the right public health measures are in place, including significant capacity for contact tracing.

But while some countries are considering how to ease restrictions, others are considering whether to introduce them - especially many low- and middle-income countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

In countries with large poor populations, the stay-at-home orders and other restrictions used in some high-income countries may not be practical.

Many poor people, migrants and refugees are already living in overcrowded conditions with few resources and little access to health care.

The most recent pandemic experiences from Italy, the country of ICOH headquarters, specify some of the avenues that may be taken when progressing from the first and often radical steps in terms of control and protective measures, to limit the progression of the infection.

The Government, Workers and Employers in Italy have collaborated closely to plan the re-opening of their economy. It is a challenging task. The first question is, who can return to work and to which jobs. The question concerns both the worker and the workplace.

The Italian Social Security Institution, INAIL, has drawn up a set of criteria for re-opening of the production of enterprises. The set contains three main criteria:

- 1. The possibility of maintaining social distance,*
- 2. Infection potential of the particular workplace, and*
- 3. Social integration.*

Industries can be re-opened in stages. Some economic sectors never stopped functioning, for example health services. Enhanced measures of protection are urgently needed in such sectors. There are industries in which the work environment, production and working methods, and workers' protection, deserve special care, for example pharmaceutical and food industries. Across many sectors, various requirements will need to be in place to enable the renewal of the work environment, production methods and working practices, to ensure workers' protection. Restaurants and cultural services, where it will be challenging to prevent the aggregation of people, will require specific actions. Innovation in public transportation is a prerequisite for opening industries; keeping social distances and avoiding crowds are the challenges here.

The health sector is, in general, a high-risk work environment; and more so during the COVID-19 pandemic. Numerous occupationally-acquired COVID-19 infections and even fatalities have been recorded in numerous countries among health workers, who sacrifice their health and even their lives in serving others. ICOH wants to emphasize the burning need to protect health workers against COVID-19 infection, to enable them to serve the casualties of COVID-19 safely and effectively, as per WHO and ILO recommendations, and numerous EU and national guidelines advising health managers, health workers and their families. The pandemic has once again demonstrated the need for, and value of, occupational health services. ICOH wants to support the objectives of UN and WHO for the provision of Universal Occupational Health Coverage (UOHC), to cover all 3.4 billion workers across the world.

In order to re-open the economy and simultaneously manage the epidemic, there must be a renewal of working life, in many ways. The experiences gained during the epidemic can be effectively utilised. Telework can continue to a greater extent than before. This approach will assist in the management of crowds in the collective work-related traffic. Industries can start implementing more artificial intelligence, automation and robotics, and services can expand their provisions by making better use of the internet. Working schedules, working hours and shifts can be modified to prevent the formation of crowds, and the number of workers present at the workplace at any one time can be reduced. The concept of open-plan offices needs to be re-evaluated. All these considerations require development of leadership and management, as well as training of workers and managers. Occupational health services need to be expanded and the protection of vulnerable workers must be ensured. Compensation and rehabilitation of occupational diseases need wider coverage. Preparedness for possible new risks is also warranted; and preventing the stigmatisation of individuals at risk is critical.

The crisis potential will continue into the future and will be exacerbated by further challenges, such as climate change. The new requirements for crisis prediction and management must be re-evaluated; and material supply security must be ensured. ICOH calls for concerted actions in addressing the changing needs at the workplace during the critical stages of the pandemic.

28 April 2020

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