



# My ICOH years

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## Some background notes

### Changing work life and changing ICOH fields of activities

My ICOH involvement goes far back in time; I became a member already in the 1970s when I joined the SC on Neurotoxicology. During the 1980s I served as SC Officer (Physical Factors), 1990–93 as ICOH Board Member (under Sven Hernberg), 1993–2000 as Vice President (under Jean-François Caillard), and 2000–2003 as President. During these 25 years work life underwent great changes; one of the main causes being the everyday use of computers at work. However, not only the work itself changed, but also our opinion on work changed. We realized that a good work environment should not only be healthy and safe. It should also encourage professional development and personal job satisfaction, which contributed to improved work quality and productivity. We learnt that the way work was organized was of importance, and recent development made it clear for us that the question on employment and unemployment also affected the work as such, the worker and the worker's health and well-being. Downsizing enterprises resulted in increased work pace and stress among the still employed. Furthermore, during the last years of this period 'new' hazards cal-

led upon attention, e.g. physical violence, harassment and bullying at the workplace. All this meant that – as to ICOH fields of activities – these were not the same at the end of "my" 25-year ICOH period as at the beginning of it. Of course, the ICOH responsibility still included the more "traditional" chemical and physical hazards, accident prevention, musculoskeletal disorders and occupational infections, but the ever changing work life prompted new responsibilities to be added.

### 2000-2003 ICOH Officers

ICOH Officers were partly the same during the periods 1993–2000 and 2000–2003, as was the case also between the periods 1987–1993 and 1993–2000. During the Sven Hernberg Presidency Jean-François Caillard acted as Vice President and Jerry Jeyaratnam Secretary General. When Jean-François led the organization I and – during his second term – Malcolm Harrington were the Vice Presidents, with Jerry still on his post. During my term Malcolm was one of the Vice Presidents. So, there is a kind of personal staff "thread" throughout this 25-year period. This certainly is one of the reasons why the transitions between Presidency periods always were smooth and with main ICOH policies being kept intact. So, it was not so much of a revolution to take over after Jean-François, to some extent it was more to come to a laid table! Anyway, it

was a pleasure and a privilege to start my triennium as President with an experienced and qualified group of ICOH Officers: Malcolm Harrington and Ruddy Facci as Vice Presidents, and Kee Seng Chia as Secretary General.

### 2000 – 2003 ICOH Board Task Groups and Networks

At the Singapore Congress it was decided to set up special task groups (TGs) and networks within the Board aiming at the discussion and – hopefully – decision of "unsolved" ICOH matters of concern. Some of the matters were inherited from the preceding Board, others were taken up as new for the first time in 2000. I will not bore you by reviewing details of these activities but give you some examples on Task Group deliveries:

- formal establishment of a Finance Committee to assist the Secretary General in budget matters
- adoption of a Declaration-of-Interest form for all kinds of ICOH officials,
- revision of the Code-of-Ethics
- preparing for an ICOH Newsletter on the ICOH homepage
- producing a position paper on tobacco-free workplaces
- membership recruitment by promoting ICOH activities internationally and by the ICOH National Secretaries in each country
- introducing a differential membership fee for members in poorer countries with the triennium 2003–2005 as a trial period
- co-operation with other organizations such as WHO, ILO, ISSA, IOHA, IEA (International Ergonomics Association), IEA (International Epidemiology Association), ICNIRP (International Commission for Non-Ionizing Radiation Protection), WWCS (Work With Computing Systems) and Collegium Ramazzini.

Some matters, however, could not be satisfactorily decided upon during the trimester and were handed over for further discussions and decisions to the next ICOH lead:

- a request to include Spanish as official ICOH language in addition to English and French. The Task Group on Language matters agreed with the request as such but found it impossible to implement for financial reasons. The task group then proposed English, French and Spanish as official languages for a minor number of official documents



like the Constitution and Bye-laws, Code-of-Ethics and Membership registration forms, using English, however, as the working language for ICOH. It was not possible to reach agreement within the Board, and the task of pursuing the matter was forwarded to the new Board.

- revision of the ICOH Constitution and Bye-laws. The Task Group on Revision had during the past triennium worked on a proposal to accommodate also non-ICOH-members as experts in executive groups of scientific committees. This proposal, which required changes in the Constitution and Bye-laws, was approved by the Board and the General Assembly. However, the Board also agreed that the Constitution and Bye-laws were in need of a total revision, a matter to be handled by the next Board.
- further ICOH activities on HIV/AIDS. There was a definite interest from South African members to start up a scientific committee, and at the 2003 Congress the topic was discussed in some sessions.

Another type of new Board activities was the launching of “networks”. These, which follow below, were aimed at matters of current general interest and where it was needed that several scientific committees and task groups worked together:

- the Network on Information and Communication, initiated and led by Max Lum. ICOH leaflets and posters were produced in large amounts and spread around the world,
- the Network on Education and Training in Developing Countries, led by Richard Ennals,
- the Network for Guidelines on Occupational Medicine Education and Competence (GOMECE), initiated and led by Ragnar Rylander, and
- the Network on Women and Work, which – in spite of efforts – unfortunately never gained momentum within ICOH during my years as President.

## ICOH Scientific Committees 1993–2003

Since my early ICOH years I have been engaged in matters concerning the scientific committees. During the 1970s and 1980s I worked actively in the committees on neurotoxicology, physical factors and radiation and work, and as Vice President under Jean-François 1993–2000 I had the comprehensive ICOH responsibilities

for all scientific committees. As President 2000–2003 I was of course well acquainted with the committees’ activities and developments but without the same responsibilities that I had had the years before.

During this 10-year period the number of scientific committees was kept relatively constant between 30 and 35. New committees were formed and of these some were closer to my competence, interest and heart than others, e.g. Work and Vision, Radiation and Work, Work Organization and Psychosocial Factors, Unemployment and Health, Occupational Health and Development, Indoor Air Quality and Health, and History of Prevention of Occupational and Environmental Diseases.

Much more could be said about individual committees, suffice here to underline what we all know: the ICOH Scientific Committees are the backbone of ICOH. There are many other international, interested parties in the field of occupational health, but none that has the overall scientific competence of ICOH.



Joining the ICOH activities already in the 1970s.

## Some personal reflections today

When looking back at these 25 years in ICOH there are some developments where I – to some part, and together with others – was engaged in and supported. Some results were good, but I also experienced disappointments where – in spite of my engagement and support – the development did not reach the goal I hoped for.

- *ICOH membership number* reached its height in the 1980s when I think it was well above 2000. From then on, however, there was a continuous decline – today ICOH has some 1700 members. All administrations, in which I took part, were well aware of this de-

velopment and took steps – in vain, though – to stop the decline. The main reason was not to be found within ICOH, but more being an effect of a general trend in society where less interest and governmental resources were paid to occupational health. There were of course other contributing factors but it would take me too far to go into all details here. Suffice to mention a complaint we always heard: “it is too expensive – we cannot afford to be a member in ICOH”. And, for membership applicants in the poorer countries this was certainly true. So, a model for membership fee reduction for these members was worked out – by Kaj Elgstrand – which was accepted by the Board and General Assembly 2003. To my delight I can now see in the ICOH Newsletter an increasing number of new members from those countries. I am convinced that part of a future success of ICOH lies in a global involvement, confined not only to the richer countries.

- *Child labour.* In 2002 an ICOH Statement on Child Labour was published on the ICOH homepage: “The involuntary underage workers typically forfeit the chances of developing knowledge and getting education as other children get, and risk their health and welfare, under duress, in the cause of commercial gain for others, or simply for their own and their families’ survival”. Children are compelled to engage themselves in dangerous and hazardous occupations, and many of the children suffer from injuries. In my 2003 Congress Keynote Address I referred to a recent study from Bangladesh in which very high prevalence morbidities were reported among



working children. I referred to this study rather in detail just to show the magnitude of the problem, and to show how self-evident it must be for an international organization like ICOH to engage itself whole-heartedly in the challenge against child labour. The topic was addressed in several sessions of the Congress, with the outcomes aiming at future joint efforts together with ILO, WHO and IPEC (International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour).

- *Unemployment and occupational health.* During the past 15 years, or so, general recessions worldwide resulted in downsizing of enterprises and high unemployment rates in the workforce, in turn resulting in depressions and other signs on mental strain among the unemployed. However, also workers still at work suffered. Work pace and work stress increased. Nobody complained because of risk of losing the job. As a paradox sick leaves diminished – when being sick the employed nevertheless went to the job because of fear of losing it. The concept of “sickness presence” was introduced during these years. During the late 90s the labour market in many countries recovered, and the rate of unemployment was steadily dropping, and at the turn of the century reached a politically acceptable low level. However, statistics of reported work-related injuries and diseases now showed a marked increase. Among the work-related diseases those indicated as caused by organizational and social factors increased the most, and considerably more than half of these cases were diagnosed to be related to stress. Thus, unemployment and sickness absence seemed to be related as communicating vessels; when one was high, the other was low, and vice versa. Some experts interpreted the burn-outs and stress reactions – more than anything else – as symptoms of a diseased society, where people in their jobs were pressed over their capacities. ILO introduced the concept “decent employment”, and EU aimed not only at “more jobs” but also at “better jobs”. ICOH, I think, is one of the international organizations having a responsibility to deliver knowledge on how to make jobs “better” and employments “decent”. So, I appreciated very much the progress and increased activities of our “young” Scientific Committee on Unemploy-

ment and Health. I had also hoped for more established links and cooperation between ICOH and some of the international labour market associations, but in spite of efforts from my side representing ICOH such links did not see the daylight.

- There are other proposed activities (as those concerning HIV/AIDS, Women and Work) that – I am sorry to say – did not really take root in ICOH during my Officer years. There are, however, other activities which I endorsed and found successful; let me here just as an example mention the SC on Occupational Health Nursing. I have always considered nurses to be very important in occupational health since they are often the first professionals to listen to the workers’ complaints and symptoms. And believe me, I have several memories of excellent conferences and meetings led by these enthusiasts.
- *The Congresses.* As I have said above the Scientific Committees of ICOH constitute the backbone of our organization. However, in the same breath the triennial ICOH Congresses must

be mentioned. They can be said to represent the outward face of ICOH as an organization. Since the end of the 1970s I have been an active participant, especially so in Stockholm 1996 as Congress President being a cog in the machinery and in Iguassu Falls 2003 as ICOH President being an impressed “adviser”. Anyway, irrespective of the importance of my contributions to the Congresses I took part in, it was always a pleasure to be there, to listen to news from fields outside my own competence, and to meet friends and have a good time together.

Finally, I cannot conclude an essay like this of my ICOH Officer years without mentioning the support and co-work from different ICOH people. My warmest thanks go to Ms Gunborg Jungeteg at the Swedish National Institute for Working Life. Gunborg started her ICOH years more on a secretarial level but as time went by she successfully became one of the efficient administrators of ICOH as such. So, to Gunborg and all other ICOH people I worked with: thanks for your much appreciated support and friendship!



Welcoming the Patron of the 25th ICOH Congress, His Majesty King Carl XVI Gustaf of Sweden