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Consultation on implementation of
occupational cancer prevention

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Report on a WHO Meeting



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The IARC approach is that, in the absence of adequate data in humans, it is reasonable to recommend that for prevention and control purposes, chemicals for which there is sufficient evidence of carcinogenicity in animals should be considered as if they were carcinogenic to man.

Risk assessment, part of which is the estimation of the incidence of cases under conditions of use, requires information on the intrinsic carcinogenic hazard of the substance, dose response relationships, exposure and any modifying interactions between the substance and other agents. Hazard and risk assessment is a prerequisite for determining control priorities but frequently the data required for assessment are incomplete.

The control of occupational carcinogens requires scientific evidence as a basis for political decisions. The latter have to take account of public perceptions of risk, the acceptability of increased risk and the economic consequences of control. The scientific assessment should be kept separate from political decisions.

National approaches which were described are broadly similar and reflect ILO Convention No 139 and Recommendation 147 on the Prevention and Control of Occupational Hazards Caused by Carcinogenic Substances and Agents. There is some variation in the extent of separation of carcinogen control from other toxic risks, the precise criteria used to draw up regulatory lists of substances which are carcinogenic, the way in which hygiene standards are applied and the extent of administrative discretion. A common problem is the limited scientific evidence from which estimates of risk for carcinogens can be derived. This leads to difficulties in determining priorities for control and achieving agreement on the measures required for individual substances.

In most countries emphasis is on the control of main industrial uses, focussing on exposure in the workplace; less attention has been given to the special problems of small enterprises, non-industrial premises, transport and disposal.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- 1 C Occupational cancer remains an important health problem. Control measures can lead to reduced risk and prevention of a severe and frequently fatal disease.

R WHO/EURO should develop a special programme element on the prevention of occupational cancer, integrated with the regional programmes for cancer control and for workers' health.

- 2 C A number of national strategies for occupational cancer prevention are broadly similar; while some are firmly established, others have yet to be formulated in detail.

R WHO/EURO should review national strategies and disseminate the findings. They should encourage the integration of occupational cancer prevention with national programmes for cancer control and workers' health within the health care systems of Member States.

- 3 C IARC Monographs provide a scientific evaluation of carcinogenicity.
- R WHO/EURO should encourage the use of these evaluations as a basis for national approaches to occupational cancer prevention. IARC should continue to give high priority to evaluating occupational hazards.
- 4 C The knowledge and skills of a wide range of disciplines are required to implement effective prevention of occupational cancer.
- R Education and training for managers, technical and occupational health staff as well as for other health care personnel and those exposed to risk and their safety representatives are required and should be encouraged by WHO/EURO.
- 5 C Information on occupational cancer prevention is not always effectively communicated to those persons who should be aware of risks and are responsible for their control.
- R WHO/EURO should take action to facilitate the international dissemination and exchange of information and expertise at all levels on occupational cancer prevention.
- 6 C There is little information on the evaluation of occupational cancer prevention programmes, especially of non regulatory measures such as health education.
- R WHO/EURO should encourage as a first step the development of conceptual models to allow assessment of current prevention and control programmes which could subsequently lead to their improvement.
- 7 C There are important gaps in information systems on exposure to carcinogens and subsequent health effects.
- R WHO/EURO should encourage the development of information systems covering at risk populations. Data on exposure, health and demographic background should be stored.
- National and regional systems which allow access to morbidity and mortality data that can be linked to occupational exposure should be promoted as an essential prerequisite for evaluating occupational cancer risks and assessing their control. The principles of confidentiality and data protection given in the WHO/EURO cancer control programming guideline document provides safeguards and should be followed.
- 8 C Research into all aspects of occupational cancer remains a high priority.
- R Research should be encouraged, with special attention to evaluating and improving the predictive value of experimental studies and to the determination environmental exposure and biological monitoring.

ANNEX

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