

New challenges for occupational medicine: subtle boundaries and ongoing diversity

Novos desafios em Medicina do Trabalho:
limites tênues e diversidade presente

Technological and scientific advances promoted a revolution in the relations between human beings and the world of work in the past decades, or more properly from World War II onward. From the industrial revolution to this day, the study of work environments and their effects on workers' health underwent significant changes as concerns the conception of occupational and/or work-related diseases and new forms of illnesses, and also in regard to the relations between the various hierarchical levels within organizations. From the combat against chemical and biological hazards — highly relevant as a function of exposures and possible poisoning/contamination — to psychosocial risks, one might say that occupational medicine and its sisters — occupational health and workers' health — substantially changed not only their complex conceptual perception, but also their approaches and effectiveness.

In Brazil, a country of continental size, as well as in other parts of Latin America, the needs in workers' health care are dramatically heterogeneous. While there still are small, medium-sized and even large enterprises that have not yet implanted health promotion and prevention programs, in others the degree of complexity clashes with public vs. private issues. Some companies still need to develop strong actions for accident prevention, while others are characterized by difficult management styles which manifest as psychosocial disorders.

Occupational physicians meet at one and the same (in-person or virtual) workplace a kaleidoscope of possibilities of action and challenges as a result of the ongoing diversity of individuals/workers with different cultures, different ways of thinking, different functions, different hazards and moral behaviors – often torn apart as a reflection of society at large.

Absenteeism/sick leaves due to mental disorders, the notions of work ability and quality of life, prevention through vaccination at companies and studies on job satisfaction, as well as ANAMT's guideline Asthma and work: serial peak expiratory flow measurement for diagnosis, are some of the topics present in the everyday work of professionals involved in occupational medicine, and are also addressed in the current issue of RBMT.

At the International Conference on Work Organization and Psychosocial Factors held in 2017 in Mexico City, Workers' Mental and Physical Health Priorities were defined upon assuming that the involved professionals should always bear in mind that the 21st century brought substantial changes resulting from globalization and advances in technology and mass communication, which dynamically transformed the world of work, with consequent blurring of the older and clear boundaries between the personal and the professional life. Stressors of variable magnitude are continuously present within the world of work, hindering workers from achieving the ideal of “healthy, productive, happy, and resilient societies for the generations that will follow us in the coming decades,” as stated in the Declaration of Mexico on Mental Health and Work: A Call for Action, the full text of which is available in this issue of RBMT.

The challenge has been posed. To increase the knowledge of professionals, to learn from the experience of colleagues, to exchange ideas and apply them in professional practice — this is the invitation made to readers by this journal's editors, together with the contributors. Enjoy this issue.

Vera Lucia Zaher-Rutherford
Associate Editor, RBMT