

Occupational Safety and Health Concerns of Older Workers in the Philippines

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Abstract

Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) of older workers is receiving considerable attention in developed countries due to their ageing population and workforces. Demographic trends combine with rapid changes in work organization and technology and call for working conditions and a work environment that facilitate older workers to remain productive and to bring to bear their experience and skills.

The Philippines has a relatively young population and young workforce. In 2007, older workers of 55 years and above accounted for about 13 percent of total employment of about 33.7 million workers. For a number of valid reasons it is important to study OSH of older workers in the Philippines, in particular:

- due to demographic changes, especially decreasing birth rates, the Philippine population and workforce will be ageing in the decades ahead;
- presently, there are no laws and regulations governing the working conditions of older workers, leave alone their OSH requirements;
- Philippine workers intend to remain economically active beyond retirement age of 65 years, mainly for economic reasons;
- research in other countries provides conclusive evident that older workers, to remain productive, require a working environment attuned to their specific need; and
- the topic of older workers, including their OSH requirements, has not yet been a subject of research in the country.

The study has been designed to explore the OSH concerns of older workers in the light of OSH policies and programs, taking account in particular of the OSH situation in the following four sectors: manufacturing, maritime, and government health and postal services.

Questionnaire-based surveys covering workers of 45 years and above from these sectors went hand in hand with individual interviews by OSHC specialist with focus on the socio-demographic profile of respondents, their OSH knowledge, attitudes and practices, the OSH conditions in their workplaces; and their work-related injuries and illnesses.

A total of 147 workers have been interviewed originating from the government health service (13), the Central Post Office (86), from manufacturing (12) and the maritime industry (18). The age of respondents ranged from 45 to 64 years old. Both sexes were equally represented, by 73 males and 74 females respectively.

The following findings emerged from the analysis of questionnaires and interviews:

-Workers in the private sectors (100 %) seemed to be more familiar with existing OSH policies and programs than their counterparts in the government health service (68%) and the Central Post Office (78%). Reference was made to such preventive OSH programs as medical examinations, training, information dissemination, health promotion, work environment monitoring and health insurance. Workers in the private sector were also familiar with programs to accommodate age-related changes.

- A decrease in vision and a noticeable decrease in agility or speed of work were the most common physiologic changes cited by the respondents.

The respondents likewise reported positive age-related changes such as an enhanced capacity for sound judgment;

-Workers in manufacturing reported the least incidence of occupational hazards whereas the workers from the maritime sector reported the highest level of work-related hazards.

-Differences in work processes and the work environment appeared to significantly influence workers' perceptions of hazards. For the health services, mental stress, such as meeting deadlines and quick decision-making, were the most frequently mentioned hazards. Workers in the postal services identified heat, noise and chemicals as the most common safety and health hazards. Maritime workers referred to extreme temperatures, chemicals and frequent travel as being their most hazardous safety and health concerns.

-Non-communicable disorders such as hypertension, diabetes and osteoarthritis were frequently reported health concerns among workers in the government services. Notably, workers in the manufacturing and maritime sectors did not report any of these disorders.

-More than 50% of the respondents from all four sectors intended to remain economically active after retirement at 65 years, for various reasons, mainly financial.

The preliminary findings of this sample survey may reflect, with some variations, the concerns and aspirations of older workers in most sectors of the economy. The physical and cognitive changes associated with ageing are well recognized by older workers; they also are fully aware of effects on their safety and health of the rapid changes in their work environment. They are looking forward to support through age-related policies and programs and an age-

friendly and non-discriminatory work environment. The study did brought into sharper focus that the concerns of older workers should be addressed by well attuned measures ranging from age-related health promotion and an improved work-life balance to ergonomic and organizational adjustments in individual work places. Considering the long-term consequences of life-style behavior on work performance in later years, it is most important to promote among younger workers preventive programs related to drugs, alcohol and tobacco.

Based on these preliminary findings, further studies will explore the scope for and content of OSH policies and programs that safeguarding the capacity for a productive and rewarding work of older workers.