

ABSTRACT

Future of Occupational Health Project: Final Report and Recommendations

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Introduction: Economic, social, technical and political drivers are fundamentally changing the nature of work and work environments, with profound implications for the field of occupational health. While significant improvements have been made to workplace conditions over the last several decades, the number of workplace injuries, illnesses and deaths remains unacceptably high and imposes an enormous burden on society. Despite recognition of these realities, researchers and practitioners entering the field are largely being trained to assess and control exposures using approaches developed under old models of work which may not adequately address health hazards in the workplaces of the present and future. These concerns prompted a project to examine the future of occupational health.

Speaker Series and Symposium: To aid the exploration of how these macro-level trends may affect occupational health, a series of thought leaders from different disciplines was invited to discuss their perspectives on these big-picture trends and stimulate discussion among faculty, staff and students at the University of Washington. The speaker series culminated in a two-day symposium exploring the future of occupational health practice, research and policy, with content informed by our speaker series, symposium keynote talks, submitted abstracts and input from a diverse group of symposium participants that included researchers, physicians, policymakers, students and others. About 125 participants from across the United States and Canada attended and contributed to small and large group discussions following each of the keynote presentations.

Summary of Outcomes and Emerging Cross-Cutting Themes: Despite the relatively diverse group of presenters and topics addressed in this speaker series and symposium, some important cross-cutting themes emerged from these discussions. Changes in work organization due to fissuring of organizations and the resulting insecurity and precarious employment arrangements change the nature of risk to a large fraction of the workforce. Workforce demographics are changing, becoming increasingly diverse in gender, age, race and nativity, and economic disparities among working groups are rapidly growing. Globalization exacerbates the ‘race to the bottom’ for cheap labor, poor regulatory oversight, and limited labor rights. Largely as a result of these phenomena, the historical distinction between work and non-work exposures have become largely artificial and less useful in understanding risks and developing effective public health intervention models. Additional changes related to climate change, governmental and regulatory limitations, and inadequate surveillance systems challenge and frustrate occupational health progress, while new biomedical and information technologies expand the opportunities for understanding and intervening to improve worker health.

Creating Occupational Health for the Future: Ideas emerging from the Future of Occupational Health project form the basis for a continuing discovery of what the key challenges are in occupational health, and what directions the field needs to move in order to make the work relevant and effective in preventing the continuing burden of work-related injury and illness. We propose the general direction of moving traditional occupational health training, professional practice and research toward a more holistic, public health oriented model for addressing the health and safety needs of workers. This will require engagement with a wide network of stakeholders interested in the intersection of work and health, including from related academic disciplines, industry, labor/community interests, and key governmental agencies. Research and training portfolios will also need to be broadened to better align with the current realities of work and health, and to prepare graduate students leaving their training programs for the changing array of occupational health challenges they will likely encounter in their careers.