**SOME THOUGHTS ON HEALTH AND SAFETY**

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“Workplace safety aims at eliminating the health risks involved in a particular job and hence makes the job profile a secure option for interested candidates.” (Shukor, 2014)

It is so saddening that since being invited to write this editorial at the beginning of 2016, we are recording the fourth fatality at the place of work. Statistics published by the National Statistics Office indicate a declining number of accidents being reported in Malta. From a high of nearly 5,000 cases reported in 2002, the number of cases reported to the Social Security Department last year went down to just over 3,000 (Occupational Health and Safety Authority (OHSA), Malta, 2016).

This persistent downward trend in occupational injury rates and numbers of fatalities can be attributed to activities which raise awareness and disseminate information. However, as George Robotham, a world leading Risk and Safety consultant, declared:

“A health & safety problem can be described by statistics but cannot be understood by statistics. It can only be understood by knowing and feeling the pain, anguish, and depression and shattered hopes of the victim and of wives, husbands, parents, children, grandparents and friends, and the hope, struggle and triumph of recovery and rehabilitation in a world often unsympathetic, ignorant, unfriendly and unsupportive, only those with close experience of life altering personal damage have this understanding.” (OHS Change, 2012)

Occupational health and safety is a complex subject which requires the cooperation of stakeholders and duty holders. It can only be improved through a self-regulating process where all duty holders recognise that it is in their best interest to adhere to their duties as imposed by law.

In Malta we have a well-developed legislative framework, but we do lack sufficient human resources to ensure implementation and enforcement. In this respect, the University of Malta has given an important contribution these last few years by offering a Diploma programme in Health and Safety through its Centre for Labour Studies. Recently, the same Centre has announced the launching of a degree programme in the subject. This should go some way to alleviate the problem of lack of more qualified personnel in the Health and Safety inspectorates, a problem which appears to be present even among Member States of the European Union.

In terms of the Occupational Health and Safety Authority Act XXVII of 2000 and other subsidiary regulations, employers have various legal obligations that must be fulfilled in order to manage health and safety at the place of work. Employers have the general duty of ensuring the health and safety at all times of all persons who may be affected by the work being carried out for such employers. This duty is considered to be wide in its scope and encompasses a series of other obligations intended to fulfil such a general duty.

On their part, workers have the duty to safeguard one’s own health and safety and that of other persons who can be affected by reason of the works carried out. Workers must also cooperate with the employer and with the Health and Safety Representative or Representatives at the work place on all matters relating to health and safety.

In a health care setting, the issue of health and safety is even more complex than in other workplaces due to the “biological component”, meaning the handling of potentially infective body fluids. Other risks facing health care workers stem from specific hazards connected with their professions. These include the possible exposure to ionising radiation, back injuries connected with manual handling, the stressful situations due to pressure of work in Accident and Emergency Departments, the exposure to high levels of anaesthetic gases in operating theatre air, and the handling of cytotoxic medications. All these contribute to a high level of risk if the right precautions are not taken.

As George Robotham aptly noted, “Health & Safety is about change for the future NOT blame for the past” (OHS Change, 2012). Indeed, the greatest threat to our safety is complacency in the face of new and emerging risks associated with our economic growth, competitiveness and long-term sustainable employment.

Bibliography


