Occupational health services in Nepal

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**Background**

The global workforce constitutes more than half of the world’s population (1). Sound health and healthy working conditions are thus prerequisites. Issues relating to the health, safety, work ability and well-being of each worker are fundamental and concern overall socioeconomic development. This raises the need for occupational health as an important tool and strategy to ensure workers’ health, to enhance economies through improved and increased productivity, to assure quality products and to increase work motivation and maintain job satisfaction (2). Occupational health services (OHS) are therefore an effective tool to increase workers’ overall quality of life and to promote development of society at all levels.

The notion of OHS dates back to 1978, with WHO Alma Ata Declaration (Article VI) (3). Reinforced by ILO Convention No. 161 on Occupational Health Services and the WHO Global Strategy on Occupational Health for All, the Alma Ata Declaration(4) emphasized the need for organizational services to cater for the occupational needs of all working people worldwide.

Occupational health services is a multi-prong approach which requires the availability of services to all working people but stresses local adaptation measures. OHS prioritizes catering to local needs but seeks affordable means; it ensures that employers remain obliged to the workforce and strives for intermediate-level services so that implementation would be more effective. It moreover makes necessary arrangements for fostering basic services, as stipulated by the ILO Conventions 161 and 155 (5).

Despite serious efforts, much still remains to be done. The gravity of the issue is indicated by the fact that, following more than three decades of multifarious needs assessment and prioritization, more than 80% of the global workforce work and live without adequate access to OHS (2).

**Nepalese perspective**

Industrialization is a major foundation for the development of any country. A global phenomenon, industrialization has emerged as an important economic driving force and a common indicator of development. For the sustainability and continued development of industrialization, it is essential to have increased production and enhanced productivity, for which safe work and a safe workplace are the complementary base.

A nation practising subsistence agriculture is in transition as concerns its industrial development. The workforce in Nepal is largely engaged in informal sectors, such as agriculture and service industries. The industrial set-up is dominated by medium-sized and household-level industries; very few large-scale industries are in operation. The concept of occupational health and safety is relatively new and very few industries maintain optimum occupational standards. The nation at large is still ignorant of occupational health issues. The government has already put into place several legal provisions on occupational health and safety, including a few acts [the Labour Act (2048/1992) and its subsidiaries] and some international regulations.

Although the legal requirements regarding OHS are not tough, the greatest constraints are still grounded in effective implementation, successful enforcement and periodic updates of legal systems. This provides an opportunity to instill the concept of OHS, its utility and its impacts on making working conditions appropriate. The recent globalization of economies has also provided a newer dimension: Nepal, with its strategic geopolitical positioning, has the potential to be an industrial hub and prosperous trading centre. The presence of resources in abundance and of relatively cheap labour provides an opportunity to increase industrial activities. The tourism-based service industry and agro-based industries are still unaware of OHS. Harnessing these sectors along with the industrial sector will provide a broader platform and wider audiences for OHS.

**Trends and practices of OHS in Nepal**

The concept of OHS in Nepal is in its initial stage, as the principle and ideologies underpinning the notion of OHS have not gained a foothold in Nepal at all levels. Occupational safety is considered significant in mechanized industries, while its importance in other sectors still needs to be justified.

The current practice of occupational safety is largely guided by the Labour Act of Nepal, which stipulates the provision of workers’ health care, factory inspection and labour inspection. The Labour Act of Nepal ensures the provision of first aid in industrial enterprises with more than 50 employees, and an academically trained medical assistant in the case of industrial enterprises with more than 400 workers. If an industrial enterprise has more than 1,000 employees, there should be a medical doctor and a medical assistant. The factory inspection functions to promote occupational safety and health conditions in the establishments and demands for optimum conditions as per the Act. Likewise, labour inspection is carried out to assess information on workers’ health conditions.

The major limiting factors in these modes of inspections are the significant loopholes in the existing legal provisions and failure to act as changes emerge. Moreover, the meticulous task of inspection requires human resources with considerable insight of occupational health and safety, but such resources are often lacking. Other limiting factors include the uneven

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distribution of inspecting units, a lack of necessary training and orientation for surveillance, and incomplete coverage of all industrial establishments. These conditions have led to a shortage of ample information and statistics on occupational health and safety practices in the nation. Occupational health and safety measures should not be motivated by fear of punishment and penalization under the law; they should be cultivated as a working culture and a prerequisite for work.

The government realized the need for occupational health and safety, and established a separate unit aimed at maintaining occupational standards. This effort led to the occupational safety and health project born more than a decade ago. The project goal was to provide training, review legal frameworks and assist in creating primary information on occupational health conditions. It was also responsible for triggering the momentum of change to establish the necessary occupational standards at industrial enterprises. The project is still in operation, but it lacks coordination of the efforts required by various ministries and departments, and the human resources allocated for the project are often inadequate to perform the assignments. The lack of adequate working procedures and skilled human resources also limit the project, and lack of resources always puts constraints on effective achievement of the objectives and goals of the project.

Most industries and employers are profit-oriented. The obligation of providing safe working conditions is often overlooked, making work and working conditions hazardous. An easy escape mechanism is provided by loopholes in the legal systems. This tendency has increased risk and has meant a many-fold rise in work-related hazards.

The labour force, on the other hand, has united into federations resembling political institutions rather than organization designed to ease work-related problems. These labour unions are largely guided by political interests and act according to their political affiliation. A few prudent initiatives have been made by the labour force, but they always lack effective coordination amongst them; there is also the absence of a voice for the unions. Thus, these efforts have not led to solutions addressing the much aspired concerns of workers. The labour force at the bottom rung of the ladder still faces hardship as a deaf ear is often turned to their pleas, and issues pertaining to healthy working conditions are often overlooked by both the state and employers. This side of those in need has not been able to advocate for change effectively. The reality of this situation is such that workers are still collectively bargaining for issues relating to minimum wages, equal remuneration and other basic needs that overshadow issues pertaining to OHS or safety.

The picture is not bleak everywhere. The onset of foreign direct investment and the emergence of a few multinational companies have been able to depict the best practices of OHS. It has been observed that these foreign investment settings together with the establishment of an industrial set-up lead to the importing of working culture. This process has helped to reinforce the concept of OHS in Nepal. These industries have been involved in surveillance of the work environment, surveillance of workers’ health, preventive measures, emergency preparedness and diagnosis of occupational illness at regular intervals. This approach is also shared by a few international projects ongoing in Nepal. These best practices are yet to spread to a greater number of industries, production houses and others in the informal labour sector.

The lack of coordinated efforts has led to serious occupational hazards. The most common hazards in the industries of Nepal are associated with industrial injuries, accidents, mechanical and chemical hazards and psychosocial hazards. A few cases of death have been reported. The causes of industrial accidents are varied, but major causes are the ignorance of workers and employers and the negligent efforts of the government. Among other causes, violation of safety rules is important. Other factors include lack of formal training, worker attitudes, lack of supervision, use of old or outdated machines or equipment, poor layout, congested workplaces and unsuitable working conditions (5). Industrial enterprises also lack measures to provide diagnosis of occupational diseases and treatment facilities. So far, the safety measures adopted by establishments in order to prevent accidents are limited to supervision, a few initiatives of repair and maintenance, and a scant use of personal protective equipments.

The occupational hazards in these instances pertain only to the industrial workforce, as very few studies on agricultural and service industries have been carried out. The larger side of the picture is absent, as the majority of the workforce are still engaged in both formal/informal agricultural and service sectors.

**Barriers to OHS**

The industrial history of Nepal is rather short. To keep pace with the contemporary world, Nepal has been turning wheels at full speed and overlooking issues of occupational health and safety. The major obstacle to instilling the concept of OHS in Nepal lies in the inability of stakeholders to grasp the utility and importance of OHS. Occupational health and safety procedures require adequate surveillance of the work environment and risk assessment, both of which are missing completely from most industries in Nepal. Neither have most industries been able to conduct periodic health surveillance and health examinations to determine workers’ health status. Control measures for preventive and emergency preparedness are also absent in most industries. Likewise, diagnostic procedures for occupational disease and recordkeeping of such events are lacking. It will therefore take some time to develop the concept of OHS with preventive, curative and rehabilitative measures under a single umbrella of OHS among entrepreneurs in Nepal.

The barriers to OHS identified in Nepal can be generalized as follows:
- Lack of awareness concerning OHS at all levels
- Faulty legal systems and lack of periodic updates
- Inability to establish OHS as an integral component of working life
- Lack of professional expertise
- Resource constraints.

Industrial enterprises in Nepal have failed to develop the infrastructures necessary for effective implementation of occupational health programmes, including OHS. Similarly, no efforts have been made to establish research programmes and to facilitate training and education in relation to OHS. The wish to create a primary desk for generating OHS information services and databanks is also lacking. It is noteworthy that efforts for OHS delivery need to be started from the beginning; the few existing initiatives have remained incomplete and unable to trigger ripple effects.

**The way forward**

The task of providing OHS and maintaining a safe and healthy work environment is not easy. It requires a sincere and coordinated effort of all. Workers need to be empowered to advocate for improved working conditions. They should be informed and educated on occupational grounds for an effective occupational response through their meaningful participation (3). Workers should also be informed of their rights concerning their working conditions, potential hazards and risks associated with their work and workplace. A mechanism is required for their holistic transformation so that they are able to participate in planning and decision-making concerning occupational health and other aspects of their work, safety and health (6).

Employers should be made to understand their responsibility for workers’ safety and health, and they should honour this obligation. It is also necessary to make them understand that OHS is an investment that is likely to result in motivation, job satisfaction, a good ambience and increased responsibility on the job. This chain of events will ultimately trigger qualitative and quantitative product increments, solidarity and a sense of ownership amongst all.

Government agencies also need to be encouraged to develop a special national framework, policy and programmes for occupational health, including actions for providing competent OHS for all people at work (3). The programme should focus on developing appropriate legal provisions and systems for effective enforcement. It should have an inbuilt mechanism of inspection and surveillance by professional authorities who are made responsible for maintaining optimum occupational health and safety at workplaces.

It has to be understood that occupational health and safety, socioeconomic development, and the quality of life and well-being of working people are intricately woven, interlinked fabrics. This suggests that any prudent inputs in occupational health – whether in intellectual or economic terms – always result in increased productivity and have a significant impact on the national economy in terms of economy and sustainability (5).

The concept of occupational safety is new in Nepal. Best practices need to be shared adequately. OHS providers need to bridge the gulf of bureaucratic systems and employers’ tenacity, and must ensure the presence of an informed workforce. This will help reduce work-related vulnerabilities and establish occupational health and safety for all.

**References**


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