Letter to the Editor

IOHA/ICOH Declaration on Occupational Hygiene

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In São Paulo, Brazil there is a centerpiece outdoor sculpture not unlike Nelson’s Column in Trafalgar Square. It is a tribute to the bandeirantes, the banner-carrying pioneers of Brazil, who fought through the wilderness of South America to claim the western frontier of what is now their nation. There is currently a group of professionals in Brazil who are considered to be the bandeirantes of occupational hygiene in that region. On 27 February 2003, at the 27th ICOH Congress in Iguassu Falls, Brazil, a 26-point document entitled ‘ICOH and IOHA Declaration to Strengthen the Position of Occupational Hygiene’ was ratified. I signed this document for the International Occupational Hygiene Association (IOHA), and Bengt Knave signed for the International Commission on Occupational Health (ICOH). In light of the international nature of this document, it was also signature-approved at the event by both Jukka Takala, head of occupational safety and health at the International Labour Organization (ILO), and Maged Younes, head of occupational health at the World Health Organization (WHO).

The genesis for the Declaration began at the Workshop on Occupational Hygiene held in São Paulo, Brazil on 4–6 December 2002. This Workshop was put on thanks to the ever-ongoing work of Berenice Goelzer, on behalf of our profession, and the efforts and support of SENAC São Paulo and Fundacentro. The purpose of the Workshop was to emphasize the importance of occupational hygiene as a profession in Brazil and focus on the skills necessary to truly achieve prevention under the guise of occupational health. Invited to this event as representatives of IOHA were Kurt Leichnitz, Paul Oldershaw and myself. Discussions during this workshop included the ongoing efforts in Brazil and the region to officially recognize occupational hygiene as a profession. IOHA pursued this lack of recognition in concert with ICOH to ensure this issue would be addressed in time for the ICOH Congress to be held in Brazil a few months later. There is fervent optimism that this document will indeed lead to the recognition of occupational hygiene in Brazil very soon. It is IOHA’s goal that this Brazilian precedent will spread throughout Latin America and simultaneously the rest of the world. The Declaration was drafted with the intention that it can be utilized by countries worldwide for this purpose.

IOHA is taking a lead role in representing our profession and infusing prevention into the global concepts of occupational health. International organizations that represent the occupational health professions, such as WHO, ILO, ICOH and IOHA, are currently in a position to co-operate towards common occupational health needs worldwide. This interplay has improved understanding and communication between these organizations, for the benefit of the workers we are committed to protect. This Declaration embodies this co-operative effort. The 26 points within this document emphasize the need for occupational physicians and occupational hygienists to work together to achieve prevention of work-related diseases. That is the goal of this Declaration. The importance of this document is immediately being felt worldwide, so it is essential that it be shared with all those in the greater occupational health professions in a timely fashion.

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Editorial note: the text of the Declaration is given in the News Pages of this issue