

FACTS AND COMMENTS ON OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH ...

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When some forty years ago Workmen's Compensation laws were enacted by various states there was general agreement that these laws should provide compensation against injuries to the external parts of the body, such as lacerations, amputations, burns, bruises, fractures, ruptures, etc. This type of injury is often caused by contact with electrical, mechanical, physical or structural things but can also result from contact with corrosive or irritant chemicals, temperature extremes, poisonous plants or insects.

As the years rolled on it was recognized that there were still other industrial injuries, also referred to as occupational diseases, not so easily recognized. Such injuries are caused by long-time exposures to high concentrations of silica, benzol, lead, or other cumulative poisons which can and do result in serious, disabling injuries and even death.

A list of industrial diseases might name as many types of poisonings as there are harmful chemicals. The list of such chemicals is constantly expanding as the science of chemistry grows and develops. Many of the chemicals recognized as poisonous today were not in use, and probably not even known, a few years ago.

Last, but not least, we are now confronted by the fact that certain industries are introducing atomic power, radiation, radio-active material, and other new, mysterious and untried means and methods in production.

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It should be noted that the U.S. Public Health Service created a Division of Occupational Health forty years ago. Many, but not all the states, have concerned themselves with the subject matter but factual statistical information is still fragmentary. California has an outstanding record in this respect and because of this record the Surgeon-General of the U. S. Public Health Service recently appointed the Director of Industrial Relations to serve on an Advisory Committee to consider these involved problems.

The number of California workers disabled as a result of occupational diseases increased from 4,344 in 1949 to 5,300 in 1953. This increase of 22 percent compares with a rise of 15 percent in traumatic injuries reported.

When the statistics of occupational diseases for California are compared with those for other states, it may appear that ours is an unhealthy state in which to work. This, however, is an erroneous assumption and is due to the fact that California has a highly developed procedure for recording occupational injuries and disease, a procedure found in very few, if any, of the other states. Every doctor must file a report with the California Department of Industrial Relations if he attends a person suffering from any occupational disease or work injury, preventing the employee from returning on the next succeeding work day. Also, every employer must file a report. Thus we have complete reporting in California.

Full coverage for occupational diseases under Workmen's Compensation laws is provided in thirty states. Sixteen states compensate only for such occupational diseases as are listed in the respective laws, with a coverage list ranging from 9 to 46 diseases. Only Mississippi and Wyoming do not compensate for any occupational disease.

It was the unanimous conclusion of the Advisory Committee that to make real progress in prevention of occupational diseases it is essential to strive for a uniform system of defining, reporting, and compiling statistics on such diseases. At present, no two states compile their statistics the same way.

Coverage of occupational diseases by the compensation act is the result of a gradual evolution in this country. Difficulties inherent to the problem have been recognized but comparatively little constructive guidance has been given the compensation authorities in the processing of information on occupational diseases.

The possible mass destruction of life in an atomic age has had much sensational publicity. Very little has been said or printed regarding the introduction of atomic energy in industry and its possible effect upon those who earn their livelihood in industry. Yet, it is self-evident that facts upon this development would be of benefit to all groups concerned, including labor and management, the medical profession, insurance companies, and very much so to the administrators of Workmen's Compensation laws.