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**The International Commission on Occupational Health. Past and present.**

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## The International Commission on Occupational Health

### Past and present<sup>1</sup>

In 1902, Dr De Cristoforis, an Italian senator and the head of the Department of Education of the city of Milan, proposed holding an international congress on occupational diseases in celebration of the opening of the Simplon tunnel and, specifically, in commemoration of the 10 000 miners who had died of ankylostomiasis during the construction of the St Gotthard tunnel. The congress was delayed until 1906, but, when it was finally held in Milan in June of that year, the "International Permanent Commission on Occupational Medicine" was founded with the intent to organize an international congress every third year and to exchange ideas and experiences among leading scientists in occupational medicine. Dr De Cristoforis was elected the first president of the Commission, Professor Luigi Devoto became its vice-president, and Dr Luigi Carozzi its secretary-general.

For a long time the Commission was a closed society. Initially it had only 18 members from 12 countries, and the membership grew slowly during the next few decades. The strict membership policy of the Commission stated an upper limit of 200 members and allowed no more than 12 members from the same country. In 1957, however, a new policy was adopted whereby the acceptance of members became more liberal. Thereafter the membership began to

grow rapidly, exceeding 500 in 1970 and 1000 in 1985. Today, in 1992, the members already number 1850 professionals from 75 countries.

The adoption of a new membership policy also prompted a change of name in 1957. It was thought that "association" better described the new character of the Commission. Hence the name was changed to the "Permanent Commission and International Association of Occupational Health." This rather awkward name was shortened in 1984 to the "International Commission on Occupational Health" (ICOH) in connection with a thorough revision of its constitution and bye-laws.

According to its constitution, ICOH is an international nongovernmental scientific society whose aim is to foster the scientific progress, knowledge, and development of occupational health in all of its aspects. Its official languages are English and French. Today ICOH is the world's leading international scientific professional society in the field of occupational health.

Founded in Milan, the Commission has always had a strong Italian color. Its secretariat has been located in Milan most of the time, and even though it was moved, first to London and then to Geneva and Singapore, the archives are still kept in Milan at the Clinica de Lavoro. Table 1 gives a list of ICOH's past and current presidents and secretaries-general. Earlier the officers could be elected for an indefinite length of time, but now the terms are fixed to a maximum of two three-year periods, except in the case of the secretary-general.

Triennial congresses have been ICOH's most visible activity during its 86 years of existence. These congresses have been organized regularly since 1906, with disruptions only for the world wars. The 24th Congress is scheduled for Nice, France, in 1993, and the 25th for Stockholm, Sweden, in 1996. These congresses have become increasingly popular, and they nowadays attract between 2000 and 3000 participants from all over the world. Table 2 shows the venues of earlier and future congresses.

Another important mode of activity is the work of the scientific committees. A decision to set up such committees was made at the Helsinki congress in 1957, and soon committees for absenteeism, maximum allowable concentrations, shift work, and lead intoxication began to function. Today ICOH has 26 scientific committees representing a great variety of

**Table 1.** Past and present presidents and secretaries-general of the International Commission on Occupational Health.

	Period
<i>President</i>	
De Cristoforis	1906—1915
L Devoto	1915—1936
D Gilbert	1936—1940
T Stowell	1948—1951
P Mazell	1951—1954
S Forssman	1954—1969
L Noro	1969—1975
E Vigliani	1975—1981
R Murray	1981—1987
S Hemberg	1987—
<i>Secretary-general</i>	
L Carozzi	1906—1957
E Vigliani	1957—1975
R Murray	1975—1981
L Parmeggiani	1981—1988
J Jayaratnam	1989—

<sup>1</sup> Reprinted (with updates) from the *ICOH Triennial Report 1987—1989*.

disciplines, professional groups, scientific fields, and industrial branches.

The professional distribution of ICOH's 1850 members is wide and includes physicians, occupational hygienists, occupational health nurses, safety engineers, psychologists, chemists, ergonomists, statisticians, social scientists, and physiotherapists. These professionals work either for universities, institutes of occupational health, governments, or various branches of industry. In 1992, the largest national groups were those from France, the United States, Finland, Japan, the United Kingdom, and Sweden. In addition to the individual members, ICOH has 27 sustaining and 33 affiliate members, comprising industrial companies, institutions, and professional and scientific associations.

ICOH publishes the *ICOH Quarterly Newsletter/CIST Bulletin Trimestriel*, which is circulated to all of its members. This bilingual newsletter contains congress reports, reviews of publications, a list of coming events, and information on research and other activities relevant to the members. Funds permitting, the newsletter will be developed into a professional journal in the future.

Recently, ICOH issued a code of ethics in both English and French for occupational health professionals. Translations to other languages are encouraged.

In 1991 ICOH organized its first international seminar on the topic "Occupational Health for Developing Countries" in Singapore. The seminar was successfully attended by 37 participants from 14 countries.

Being recognized by the United Nations (UN) as a "nongovernmental organization," ICOH keeps a close working relationship with the World Health Organization (WHO), the International Labour Organisation (ILO), and other UN bodies, as well as with the Commission for the European Communities and the International Social Security Association.

Every professional in occupational health can join ICOH by filling out an application form signed by three sponsors who are members in good standing. Application forms can be obtained from the Secretariat, address: ICOH, Department of Community, Occupational and Family Medicine, National University Hospital, Lower Kent Ridge Road, Singapore 0511, Republic of Singapore [telefax (+65) 779-

**Table 2.** Venues of the triennial congresses of the International Commission on Occupational Health.

Venue	Year
Milan	1906
Brussels	1910
Vienna (canceled)	1914
Amsterdam	1925
Budapest	1928
Geneva	1931
Brussels	1935
Frankfurt	1938
London	1948
Lisbon	1951
Naples	1954
Helsinki	1957
New York	1960
Madrid	1963
Vienna	1966
Tokyo	1969
Buenos Aires	1972
Brighton	1975
Dubrovnik	1978
Cairo	1981
Dublin	1984
Sydney	1987
Montreal	1990
Nice	1993
Stockholm	1996

1489]. The membership fee for the triennium 1993—1995 is CHF 240.00. Advantages for members include a free subscription to ICOH's quarterly newsletter, a substantial reduction of the registration fee of ICOH-sponsored conferences, 20 to 30% reductions for the subscription rates of several international journals, among them the *Scandinavian Journal of Work, Environment & Health*, and of certain ILO and WHO publications.

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