

53rd Nordic work environment meeting in Oslo – a success

During the last years, the need for a Nordic work environment meeting (NAM) has been questioned. Are there not enough international meeting events? Today we are offered a broad variety of congresses covering either occupational health in general [ie, the International Commission on Occupational Health (ICOH) congress], method-oriented conferences [ICOH's Scientific Committee on Epidemiology in Occupational Health (EPICOH)], branch-oriented meetings (ICOH subcommittee meetings), or conferences covering just a specific research field.

In addition, there has been increasing concern over the use of Scandinavian languages at the Nordic meetings. During one of the last NAM, held in Oslo during the late summer of 2008, we resolved this by requesting all written material to be in English (1). But in turn, this makes the Nordic event similar to other international meetings. Consequently, we need to justify NAM on grounds other than linguistic necessity. Up to now, the main argument has been that the Nordic countries have important social similarities and strong traditions in occupational health research that might benefit from cross-border research cooperation. In addition, NAM has been an arena where young researchers get inspiration and feedback from colleagues.

In an effort to address the decline in the number of NAM participants over the last years, in 2007 cooperation was established with the Nordic Institute for Advanced Training in Occupational Health (NIVA), offering NAM participants the possibility to attend NIVA courses alongside the ordinary congress; however this turned out to be too complex. Consequently, a decision was taken to offer just one NIVA workshop – Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disorders (COPD) – at the Oslo meeting last year. Our experience with this was very positive and the initiative should be continued. We were also fortunate to be able to include, as one of the parallel sessions on the second day, a 30-year anniversary seminar for the Nordic Expert Group on Criteria Documentation of Chemical Health Risks. Finally, we aimed at drawing occupational health personnel to the meeting, especially from the host country. In total, these joint activities succeeded in attracting more than 250 participants, with a good mix of colleagues from research and practice.

Jukka Takala, Director of the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work in Bilbao, Spain, gave the opening plenary presentation at NAM on the European Union (EU) work environment strategy for Europe (2). He was followed by Kjell Torén, a professor at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden, who introduced the NIVA course topic on COPD and work. Other plenary topics included a presentation by Helge Kjuus, a director at the Norwegian National Institute of Occupational Health (NIOH), on the health effects of chemical exposures in modern enterprises, and a presentation by Thomas Schneider, senior researcher at the Danish National Research Centre for the Working Environment (NRCWE), on an exposure assessment tool for the EU Regulation on the Registration, Evaluation, Authorization, and Restriction of Chemicals (REACH).

All seven parallel sessions began with invited presentations. The NIVA workshop on COPD was opened by professor Torén, who followed up his plenary introduction. During the first parallel session on chemical and biological exposure and analysis, Wijnand Eduard, associate research director at NIOH, spoke about “Epidemiological challenges to exposure assessment.” Both from NIOH, associate research director Bo Veiersted and professor Stein Knardahl chaired the workshop on risk factors for work-related musculoskeletal disorders. Professor Jorma Rantanen, former head of the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health (FIOH), opened the Nordic expert group seminar with a presentation on “Origin and maturation of the Nordic Expert Group – a Nordic effort for chemical safety.” One parallel session

covered the organizational and psychosocial work environment, where chief medical officer and Nordic committee member Kristinn Tómasson from the Icelandic Administration of Occupational Safety and Health opened with his paper on “Mental wellbeing and the workplace”. In the epidemiology session, professor and Nordic committee member Maria Albin gave a survey of “Occupational health epidemiology in the Nordic countries, status and trends” (3). The session on sick leave and exclusion from working life was introduced by senior researchers Merete Labriola and Thomas Lund from NRCWE (at the time of the 2008 NAM but now working at the International Research Institute of Stavanger in Norway) (4). Professor Kaj Husman from FIOH introduced the last topic with a plenary presentation on “The contents of the occupational health services – the Finnish research experience”. The congress also included posters, covering a variety of occupational health topics. Finally, the conference was closed with a speech by the Norwegian State Secretary of Labor and Social Inclusion, Jan-Erik Støstad, who talked about “New efforts from the Norwegian government to strengthen the occupational health services and work environment research” – his words were certainly encouraging.

In addition to the papers referenced here, this supplement also includes an additional four papers from the free presentations from different parallel sessions (5–8). I believe they also give an impression of the broad spectrum of topics addressed and the quality of the contributions.

As chairman of this conference, I wish to thank the Nordic committee for its constructive cooperation: Maria Albin, Ari Kaukiainen, Mia Latta, and Thomas Schneider. The national committee also made a major contribution to the success of the conference: Odd Bjørnstad, Kari Heldal, Tore Tynes, and Anne Berit Iversen. Both committees contributed significantly to this supplement. This conference received financial support from the Nordic Council of Ministers (project 80162).

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