

Occupational safety and health in the 1980s

Policy options — Historic perspective

by Herbert K Abrams, MD, MPH¹

ABRAMS HK. Occupational safety and health in the 1980s: Policy options — Historic perspective. *Scand j work environ health* 7 (1981): suppl 4, 7—11. Making work safe and satisfying continues to be an uphill struggle. The passage of the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) in 1970 came after a long fight. The forces that opposed it now try to emasculate it. Workers, scientists and emancipated employers need to find ways to reduce the hostility in our adversarial system, to persuade employers that, in the long run, their best interests are served by making work safe. Several instances of labor influence at corporate levels are mentioned. Eternal vigilance will be needed in the 1980s to protect OSHA and other hard-won environmental legislation.

Key terms: humanizing work.

The history of occupational safety and health mirrors the evolution of civilization. How society treats its workers — those who create and produce — is the measure of our level of civilization.

Society has gone through eras of slavery, serfdom, piecework, wage work; through eras of child labor, unlimited hours of work, work without any semblance of protection from physical hazards, work without protection by organization, by trade unions; through eras of struggle for the most elementary humanity in work relationships — the 8-h day, unemployment insurance, workers' compensation, and security in old age.

Today, workers still face tremendous threats from unprecedented technological dangers such as ionizing radiation, a myriad of chemical hazards, laser beams,

assembly lines, unparalleled noise, and work stress, plus the constant threat of unemployment and insecurity. And in many countries, as in America, one can see the extremes, from undocumented migrant workers living on the open ground, to skilled workers watching a computer terminal. Marked class differences in morbidity and mortality, as measured by occupation, still persist (7, 8).

No one who is interested in social options can afford to miss Edward Bellamy's mind-expanding book, *Looking Backward*, published in 1888 (1). Here is his description of America in the 19th Century as he looked backward from the year 2000:

I cannot do better than to compare society as it then was to a prodigious coach which the masses of humanity were harnessed to and dragged toilsomely along a very hilly and sandy road. The driver was hungry, and permitted no lagging.... Despite the difficulty of drawing the coach at all along so hard a road, the top was covered with passengers who never got down even at the steepest ascents. These seats on top were very breezy and comfortable. Well up out of the dust, their occupants could

¹ Arizona Center of Occupational Safety and Health and Department of Family and Community Medicine, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, United States.

Reprint requests to: Prof HK Abrams, Department of Family and Community Medicine, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ 85724, USA.

enjoy the scenery at their leisure or critically discuss the merits of the straining team.... Was not their very luxury rendered intolerable to them by comparison with the lot of their brothers and sisters in the harness, and the knowledge that their own weight added to their toil? Had they no compassion for fellow beings from whom fortune only distinguished them? Oh yes, commiseration was frequently expressed by those who rode for those who had to pull the coach.... At such times the desperate straining of the team, their agonized leaping and plunging under the pitiless lashing of hunger, the many who fainted at the rope and were trampled in the mire, made a very distressing spectacle which often called forth highly creditable displays of feeling on the top of the coach. At such times the passengers would call down encouragingly to the toilers of the rope, exhorting them to patience and holding out hopes of possible compensation in another world for the hardness of their lot, while others contributed to buy salves and liniments for the crippled and injured....

Strikes had become so common at that period that people had ceased to inquire into their particular grounds. In one department of industry or another, they had been nearly incessant ever since the great business crisis of 1873.... The relation between the working man and the employer, between labor and capital, appeared... to have become dislocated. The working classes had quite suddenly and very generally become infected with a profound discontent with their condition and an idea that it could be greatly bettered if they only knew how to go about it. On every side with one accord, they preferred demands for higher pay, shorter hours, better dwellings, better educational advantages, and a share in the refinements and luxuries of life.. [pp 12—18].

Sweatshops, long hours of drudgery, wars between the classes and wars between nations characterized the world of Edward Bellamy. Published at the height of the industrial revolution in America, the book became the most popular and influential publication since *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. It offered hope to millions confused and frustrated in a world of poverty and strife.

Bellamy's hero, Julian West, falls asleep in 1887 and wakes up in the year 2000 in a totally different world in which all people are united in one enterprise, that of making society better. Money has been abolished, and a simple system of credit cards is used for all transactions. Everyone receives an education until the age of 21

when people go to work for 3 a in a variety of unspecialized jobs, after which they go into jobs for which they have special abilities. They work until the age of 45 when they can retire and spend their full time in pursuit of special goals or in leadership positions.

Since everyone works cooperatively, and there is no war and no military expenditures, there is plenty for all. People are motivated not by money or power but by the gratification of doing good work and by the praise of their peers.

It is now almost 100 a since Bellamy wrote this book. The year 2000 is fast approaching. Yet the world he describes of Boston in 1887 resembles our world of 1980. It is probably safe to say that we will not realize Bellamy's idea in 20 a. Indeed, the *Global 2000 Report* from the State Department and the Council on Environmental Quality forecasts, "If present trends continue the world in 2000 will be more crowded, less stable ecologically and more vulnerable to disruption.... Despite greater material output, the world's people will be poorer in many ways than they are today [p 1, 12]" (9).

Yet if Bellamy's ideas cease to be an inspiration to many people, we must seriously ask ourselves whether there is hope for the future.

The sociologist C Wright Mills characterized our problem with work:

Man is alienated from the product and the processes of his work.... He neither owns the tools with which he works nor understands what is involved in the products he makes. Moreover, in many jobs involving the white collar and the tight skirt, he is alienated in another and a deeper way: His personal traits — his personality — become part of the means of production and distribution. On such personality markets, he externalizes intimate features of his person and disposition; on such personality markets, he is self-alienated in an extreme and inhuman manner. He not only sacrifices the most alert hours of his day; he sacrifices his very self (5).

In the area of occupational and environmental health, we find ourselves constantly trying to catch up. Many are sacrificed to totally preventable injuries and diseases. Not only are they preventable, but in most cases, also foreseeable. Yet we find ourselves in an adversarial system with worker pitted against employer. We

who are the scientists, the healers, the preventive medicine specialists, the safety experts, the pundits are in a secondary role, often a demeaning role, sometimes permitting our expertise to be corruptly used or becoming lost in arguments of how many angels can sit on the head of a needle.

When workers reject physical examinations offered by employers or even by scientists doing "objective" studies because they are apprehensive that the examination will cause loss of their jobs, we must be stimulated to question our present arrangements. When workers fight environmentalists who are trying to maintain a safe and beautiful world because of fear that the environmentalists' efforts may result in loss of jobs, it is sad. When a woman must submit to sterilization in order to keep her job, there is something wrong. When military expenditures may not be questioned while our cities rot and our young people are unemployed, we indeed have something to worry about. Yet these are some of the symptoms of the work malaise in America today.

In our present society, the worker has very few options. He has to get out and find a job in order to live. And this job may very well be a dangerous one. The lower the social class, the dirtier and more dangerous the job. His only option is unemployment, and this is even more dangerous. We know that in periods of unemployment the incidence of homicide, suicide, mortality from cirrhosis of the liver, mental hospital admissions — all the stigmata of a disturbed society — accelerates.

Decisions for the protection of life are too often made on the basis of the "cost/benefit ratio." This pseudoscientific euphemism has become a popular tool for the pundit. The benzene level, for example, may not be reduced simply because we know how to do it. No, we must first prove in dollars and cents that it is profitable to do so. A prolife movement is sorely needed to combat this cynicism.

What are the options for those of us who have the good fortune to be educated, to become expert, to become leaders? We must engage in a neverending struggle for honesty, for objectivity in our scientific work, and for fulfillment of our obliga-

tion to society, which put us where we are, to impart our knowledge to workers so that they can better protect themselves. And these we must often do under threat of social and professional criticism, loss of job, and loss of support.

We must, at the same time, educate employers, ever hopeful that there will always be some whose humanity will outweigh more immediate and sordid motivations and permit progress toward the protection of human life.

Alice Hamilton, in *Exploring the Dangerous Trades*, wrote:

It is a pity that I cannot recall any instance of help from the industrialists (They) fought the passage of occupational disease compensation as they fought laws against child labor, laws establishing a minimum wage for women, and a maximum working day. Yet many of them are humane and benevolent employers. But as an organization, they have shown themselves to be as devoid of a sense of responsibility to the public as the most self-seeking of the trade unions [pp 12—13] (3).

In a few words this great pioneer describes our situation today. Some employers and their agents originally opposed the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and since its passage have been trying to emasculate it. And there are also trade unions with leaders who are self-seeking. Yet in both camps, there are individuals who have humanity, and these are the people we must find and build upon.

At this meeting, we are collaborating with Scandinavians who are showing the world another kind of option, and this is the possibility that under capitalism, employers and workers can be on the same side working together for the prevention and reduction of occupational hazards. There are, of course, isolated instances of such cooperation in the United States. Witness the rubber workers' research fund, and the recent instances of automobile manufacturers working with the union in the investigation and correction of certain hazards, as reported at this symposium.

Labor representation on corporate boards of directors may be a more effective approach to insuring that corporate decision making is in accord with the public interest. One recent example was

occasioned by financial difficulties of the corporation. The president of the United Auto Workers was appointed to the board of the Chrysler Corporation.

Another interesting episode is that involving the American Cyanamid Company and the International Chemical Workers Union. The issue was the exclusion of women from jobs involving exposure to hazardous chemicals. Several women apparently submitted to surgical sterilization in order to keep their jobs. A coalition was formed of labor shareholders and a religious organization, the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility. As a result the company established a Public Responsibility Committee of three nonemployee members of the Board of Directors. The committee has the responsibility to review corporate performance regarding occupational hazards, environmental protection, consumer problems, governmental relations, philanthropic activity, and public relations (4).

Even in socialist societies, where theoretically workers have power and, therefore, no adversary worker-employer relationship exists, we find that under the pressures of the day toward intensified industrialization, toward the maintenance of large military forces, and tremendous competition between nations, there is a tendency to forge ahead with technology, with chemicals, with noise, with community pollution, with all of the dehumanizing features of industrialization, while life-preserving measures lag far behind.

In the 1980s we need to do more than merely make work safe. We need to make work satisfying. As the study, *Work in America*, found, "satisfaction with work appears to be the best predictor of longevity — better known medical or genetic factors [p XVII]" (6).

Are there ways to humanize the assembly lines? Are there ways to restore pride in work? If we are to improve the quality of life, the answers will not be found in jogging and in exhortations to stop drinking or smoking; the answers will be found in the relations between human beings — and work is the key.

Albert Camus put it succinctly, "Without work all life goes rotten. But when work is soulless, life stifles and dies" (2).

If we are to have options and a chance

for realizing them, we must be mindful of Virchow's fundamental dictum: "Medicine is a social science and politics are nothing else than medicine on a large scale... [p 65]" (10).

In this spirit, scientists in occupational health and safety must work together with working people and with enlightened management in obtaining: (i) measures to protect all jobs, (ii) measures to protect the environment, (iii) measures to humanize work, and (iv) efforts to get workers, management, and science on the same side of the table.

In this spirit, scientists in industrial hygiene, toxicology, occupational medicine and nursing, and related fields need to examine their role in society. We cannot all be an Alice Hamilton or a Ramazzini or a Virchow, but we can endeavor to be honest, to remember whom and what we are working for, and to learn to enjoy the art of teaching and informing the worker — without whom there would be no jobs for occupational health specialists.

Mills put it eloquently:

No moral endeavor, no political orientation, no human study that does not pay close attention to men at work, can possibly be adequate for our time. For work is affected by and in turn affects all that man is and all that he might become. The question we must ask of any society or of any social program is what kinds of men and women does it select, encourage, create? And in terms of this human evaluation, the most important question we can ask is whether work is a void in which men sacrifice themselves or whether work is a central feature of a style of life in which man may realize himself... (5).

References

1. Bellamy E. Looking backward. Magnum Books, New York, NY 1968. (Original published 1888).
2. Camus A. The myth of Sisyphus and other essays. Knopf, New York, NY 1955.
3. Hamilton A. Exploring the dangerous trades, Atlanta. Little Brown & Co, Boston, MA 1943 pp 12—13.
4. International Chemical Workers Union, ICWU news March 24 (1980) 3.
5. Mills CW. Man and work. Northern California Mental Health Association, Asilomar Conference, San Francisco, CA 1951.
6. MIT Press, Work in America, Cambridge, MA 1970.
7. Office of Population Census and Surveys. Occupational mortality: The Registrar

- General's decennial supplement for England and Wales, 1970—1972. Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London 1970—1972. (Series DS, no 1)
8. US Department of Health and Human Services. Selected health characteristics by occupation US 1975—1976, Vital and health statistics. Washington, DC 1980. ((PHS) 80-1561).
 9. US State Department, Council on Environmental Quality. Global 2000 report to the President: Entering the 21st century. US Government Printing Office, Washington, DC 1980 (Quoted in *The Nation's Health*, September 1980 pp 7, 12).
 10. Virchow R. (Quoted by Sigerist in *Landmarks in the history of hygiene*. Oxford University Press, Oxford 1956, p 65).