

SECTION II

APPLICATION OF EPIDEMIOLOGY IN OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH

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In public health, epidemiology is recognized as the basic diagnostic discipline for populations. This recognition is also true in the field of occupational health where working people are more accessible for epidemiological observation. Occupational health has always suffered from the limited use of the epidemiological approach by occupational physicians and hygienists. This lack reflects on workers' health in several ways: incomplete information on etiological and causative factors of occupational health problems, including effects of chemicals and other single or multifactorial environmental hazards of working people; failure to recognize health trends and to decide on priorities in planning occupational health services; and failure to evaluate the effectiveness of preventive health programmes.

A definite need exists to disseminate epidemiological knowledge among occupational health personnel, occupational and environmental hygienists and toxicologists. A need also exists to improve epidemiological understanding among the workers, management and the general public because scientific findings are useful only to the extent that they can be intelligently applied by those responsible for decision making.

In 1970, the WHO Regional Office for Europe initiated a study on the epidemiology of industrial intoxication in some European countries (1). The study showed the great need for standardization of methods to be able to compare the results of studies in different countries. A great need also exists for more knowledge on the design of epidemiological studies of various occupational health problems. For these reasons, WHO has decided to develop a special programme area on "occupational health epidemiology" in its recent programme of action on workers' health. This programme area includes training courses and seminars, the preparation of manuals and conducting epidemiological health service research in places of employment (2).