Cancer is the leading cause of work-related deaths in the EU

Written by Christa Sedlatschek on 26 September 2018 in Thought Leader

Cancer is the leading cause of work-related deaths in the EU, explains Christa Sedlatschek.

Every year in the EU, about 120,000 people will develop cancer as a result of exposure to carcinogens at work. Approximately 80,000 of them will die every year from work-related cancer. Behind these stark statistics lie the human costs of lives devastated and potential unfulfilled.

There are also considerable costs to businesses and to society. The saddest thing is that we know that work-related cancer is preventable. Protecting workers from exposure to carcinogens is one of the key challenges for occupational safety and health in the 21st century. We need to embrace the challenge and take action.

At the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, we are working to highlight the scale of the
problem and the importance of preventing exposure to carcinogens at work as part of our current campaign, Healthy Workplaces Manage Dangerous Substances.

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We believe that by informing and educating workers and employers, and offering practical solutions, we can reduce and even eliminate exposure to carcinogens at work, thereby preventing needless suffering and deaths from cancer.

One of the crucial first steps in reducing exposure is establishing occupational exposure limit (OEL) values for carcinogens and then keeping them updated as new information arises. The European Commission together with the European Parliament is committed to establishing and revising OELs - and it has our full support and that of the social partners in that task.

Protecting workers requires real commitment to the cause at every level - from the smallest businesses to governments. In 2016, the Netherlands Presidency of the European Council recognised that every successful plan needs a roadmap.

"Protecting workers from exposure to carcinogens is one of the key challenges for occupational safety and health in the 21st century"

So, in May of that year, we signed up to the Roadmap on Carcinogens, along with the European Commission, the Netherlands and Austrian ministries of labour and social affairs and the European social partners. The Roadmap on Carcinogens aims to increase awareness of the risks arising from exposure to carcinogens in the workplace and to tackle them by finding practical solutions and sharing good practices.

Like our Healthy Workplaces Campaign, the roadmap provides facts and figures and practical tools. It also encourages its supporters to spread its messages by holding events and sharing their experiences and innovative prevention measures. Every subsequent presidency of the European Council since the Netherlands has strongly supported the roadmap.

The current Austrian presidency is dedicating its presidency conference in September to the theme ‘Fight against occupational cancer’, and the forthcoming Finnish EU Council presidency has already committed to supporting the roadmap.

The statistics are shocking - but we firmly believe that by working together we can reach out to workplaces across Europe and spread the message that work-related cancer is preventable. We have the tools and solutions to prevent it. Help us win the battle against work-related cancer by joining our campaign and supporting the roadmap.

About the author
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