

Advocating for Occupational Health

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Abstract

Access to meaningful work is important to enhance lives, reduce health inequity and add value to society. The Faculty of Occupational Medicine developed a strategy to advocate for Occupational Health in Ireland. The strategy was launched by the Tánaiste in November 2022.

Evolving models of work and the recent pandemic highlighted the need for, and value of Occupational Health with an imperative to promote evidence-based practice and services. Improved access to work is valuable to individuals, business and society, and requires universal access to Occupational Health services which help reduce the health inequity associated with unemployment and precarious work. Strategic objectives were developed to achieve these benefits, including timeliness, awareness, representation, and action. A call to action was issued to those who can support Occupational Health in Ireland to join together in a move towards universal access and thereby protect workers and drive down health inequity.

Introduction

In Ireland the average person will spend between 30 - 33 per cent of their waking hours at work¹ with an average duration of working life of 37 years². This means that the potential exposure to psycho-social, physical, chemical, and biological occupational hazards represents a significant challenge to health and wellbeing and also provides an imperative to support emerging cultural drives for purposeful, socially meaningful work, and health equity. This is a challenge that must be met by the deployment of adequate and appropriate access to Occupational Health particularly post-COVID-19 when there is a clear need for such input into the changing nature of work and workplaces.

The joint International Labour Organisation (ILO) and World Health Organisation (WHO) Committee on Occupational Health describes Occupational Health as 'the promotion and

maintenance of the highest degree of physical, mental and social well-being of workers in all occupations³. Occupational Health also extends to the improvement of the working environment and work itself to be conducive to good safety and health. In practice, Occupational Health is most frequently understood as activity that minimises the risk to employees' health from adverse occupational factors, preventing occupational accidents and diseases and promoting worker wellbeing⁴.

The WHO *Strategy on Occupational Health for All* states that 'access to Occupational Health services should be ensured for all workers of the world'⁵. Yet, globally it has been estimated that the employed population with access to Occupational Health was on average around 25 per cent, with Ireland at only 37 per cent^{6,7}. Information relating to access is difficult to accurately obtain due to problems with definitions of Occupational Health, lack of available data and variations across employment sectors with large organisations and public sector bodies more likely to have access than small-to-medium enterprises (SMEs)⁸.

The importance of strengthening the provision of Occupational Health services to better meet the needs of workers has been promulgated by a range of organisations including the ILO, WHO, the EU, the UK government, and the International Commission on Occupational Health (ICOH)^{3,5,6-9}. It is anticipated that health and wellbeing benefits will accrue to workers, communities, and their families. In addition to societal benefits from local work and business competitiveness, there will be an improved public health profile, and reduced inequalities⁷⁻¹⁰.

In 2022 the Faculty of Occupational Medicine, Royal College of Physicians of Ireland (FOM; the Faculty) decided that there was a need to support this concept and promote Occupational Health in Ireland and to proactively advocate for the specialty. This was consistent with the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland's (RCPI) Strategic Plan 2021-24 which includes a leadership strategic imperative to be the voice of physicians, shaping and influencing healthcare policy, at a national level.

Advocacy can be a broad set of activities at an individual or organisational level engaging with those who can enact change by initiating, mobilising, and organising activities to make change happen (e.g. design, adopt, implement or change policies and practices). Most commonly advocacy will include the important elements of campaigning, educating, informing, and lobbying and is usually regarded as a long-term process requiring a systematic, well-planned approach^{11,12}. The FOM strategy for advocacy for Occupational Health in Ireland embraces this concept.

The changing state of work

Good work and good health are interrelated and valuable to individuals, organisations, and society¹³. Multiple global forces are changing the world of work including climate crisis; political changes and instabilities; emerging public health risks; rapid technological advances and cultural shifts. There are also emerging trends such as: multigeneration and aging workforce with diverse cultural influences on workers, rising pension / retirement age and increasing impact of chronic illness. Another trend highlighted by the recent pandemic is the increased use of digital systems and access to remote working. This has been apparent in rising sedentary screen time; isolation, lack of socialisation, demotivation and blurring of boundaries between work and home; and increased sickness absence.

In addition, there are evolving contracting models, increasing transient and precarious employment associated with the gig economy, short-term and zero-hours contracts, entrepreneurial economy and increased part-time working. Workers at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder, such as those in insecure employment or on “zero hour” contracts, are the least likely to have access to Occupational Health⁸.

In 2020, the Health and Occupation Research (THOR) network in Ireland reported multiple work-related cases of contact dermatitis, musculoskeletal disease, asthma, and mental illness, with health & social care as the most common sector of incidence, but also including sectors as diverse as beauty/hairdressing, construction, manufacturing, trade, agriculture and administration¹⁴. Labour shortages are a key barrier to growth of the Irish economy, so the return-to-work and access-to-work roles of Occupational Health are highly valuable.

Developing the strategy

A Subgroup of the Board of the Faculty was formed to develop a strategy to advocate for Occupational Health. Their work was informed by desk research and a survey of Faculty members to determine material issues and opportunities.

The Faculty’s advocacy approach involves engaging with stakeholders across various sectors to explain the role, relevance and value proposition of high quality OH services. The Occupational Health community includes medical, public and private providers, health and safety, toxicology, corporate wellness, hygiene, vocational rehabilitation, physiotherapy, ergonomics, nursing and psychology. Each of these specialisms has an important role to play, not just in delivering quality Occupational Health services, but also advocating for them.

In addition, other groups were identified as being central to the advocacy process including governmental and allied organisations, educational institutions, employer and employee representatives, the wider medical community, employment law and the wider legal community, and relevant educational institutions.

In a membership survey, strong support was shown for: the development of the advocacy strategy; promoting the value of good Occupational Health services; maintaining health and wellbeing at work; promoting the health benefits of good work; and the importance of a multi-sector approach.

Four key advocacy objectives emerged (see Table 1) from this engagement and the strategy, *Advocating for the Value of Occupational Health in Ireland 2023 – 2026*¹⁵, was launched by the Tánaiste Dr Leo Varadkar in November 2022.

Table 1: Occupational Health (OH) in Ireland – main issues, opportunities, and key objectives

ISSUES	OPPORTUNITIES	OBJECTIVES
Global shifts (such as climate, technology, pandemic, transient employment) are having local impact on work and wellbeing	Evolving models of work require re-evaluation of statutory and organisational support for workers	Recognition of timely need for OH evaluation
Growing corporate and social focus on wellness vs health & safety will require OH evolution	Recent COVID-19 pandemic illuminated need for, and value of OH for wellbeing as well as health	Increased awareness of OH value
Lack of awareness of full OH offering and value to individuals, organisations, and society	Recognition of need to promote evidence-based, accredited quality OH practitioners and services	Representation of FOM for OH advocacy
Work-related ill health remains a significant burden for individuals, employers, state, and society	Improved access to work is valuable on all levels and requires universal access to quality OH services	Action towards universal OH access

Recommended strategic actions and activities to address these objectives are detailed in the Strategy available online, and include stakeholder engagement, building evidence and a plan for world class Occupational Health services, and driving change in collaboration with government and allied agencies, employer organisations and businesses.¹⁵

Discussion

There is much evidence to show that supporting individuals' health and their ability to work elevates business and the social contributions of employees and organisations. It also helps to reduce health inequity due to unemployment, precarious work and worklessness. The role of Occupational Health has been brought into sharp focus by the recent pandemic, during which Occupational Health professionals provided much-needed specialist advice to employers, workers and governments which assisted an effective management of the crisis.

The aim of the evidence-based strategy is to enhance understanding of what Occupational Health is and to actively promote its importance and relevance to the health and well-being of the nation at the individual, organisational and wider societal level. It will be built upon over time to set out how commitment and support will be obtained from all relevant stakeholders and what systems and actions are needed to achieve universal access.

A plan has been devised to empower and mobilise Occupational Health professionals, as well as business and government stakeholders, to explore opportunities for access to better and more equitable Occupational Health to meet changing global demands as they relate to Ireland.

There is no doubt that Occupational Health professionals are uniquely qualified to navigate the future of work in Ireland, ensuring the workers and the organisations they represent can reach their full potential. The Occupational Health community is aware that employers and employee representative groups are working keenly towards improved diversity, equity, and inclusion – Occupational Health services have a vital role to play here. Evolving medical and legal frameworks, and an emerging culture of human purpose and health equity, require joint representation of organisations and their staff to deliver quality evidence-based support.

An added imperative comes with the global shifts that are taking place within our environment, our society, and our places of employment. The Occupational Health community and its partners must be ready to meet those challenges.

We encourage the medical community to contribute to research on Occupational Health, advocate for the value of quality Occupational Health, encourage accreditation of individuals and assimilation of evidence-based Occupational Health practices.

In conclusion, all those with a stake in the health and wellbeing of our modern workforce need to act strategically and collectively to drive policy and legislative enhancements that move us towards universal Occupational Health access.

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