

## Preventing psychosocial risks at work: European perspectives

Closing event of the European Week for Safety and Health at Work 2002 Bilbao, Spain,  
25 November 2002

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### 1. Introduction

The European Week for Safety and Health at Work in 2002 focused on the prevention of psychosocial risks. It was launched at the European Parliament on 2 July 2002 and spread out across Europe with Member State schemes. This initiative was the first pan-European campaign to address this issue, and it has been the most high profile and popular event run by the Agency to date.

The closing event of the European Week for Safety and Health at Work took place in Bilbao on 25 November 2002. It was jointly organised by the Agency and the Danish Presidency of the European Union. The day was structured around three morning workshops dealing with stress, bullying and violence, and a round table discussion in the afternoon. Six practitioners were also invited to present their case studies to illustrate how psychosocial risks can be successfully tackled in the workplace.

This Forum publication is based on the speeches made during the three workshops and the round table discussion that followed them.

### Key facts

- Work-related stress is now the second most common occupational health problem, affecting 28 % of workers — more than 40 million people in the European Union (EU) (1).
- The number of people suffering from stress-related conditions caused or made worse by work has more than doubled since 1990.
- It has been estimated that this costs the EU more than Eur 20 billion in lost time and health costs (1).
- Four per cent of European workers report having been exposed to violence from outside the organisation, and 9 % claim to have been bullied at work, in the previous 12 months.
- In addition to the negative effects on the economy, we must not forget the human cost of work-related psychosocial risks: these issues are known to affect physical and psychological health in a variety of ways, from cardiovascular and gastrointestinal diseases to mental health problems.



(1) European Commission (2000): *Guidance on work-related stress: spice of life or kiss of death?*

## 2. Objectives of the closing event

The closing event brought together an audience of representatives of the social partners, leading European health and safety experts, labour inspection authorities, the Economic and Social Committee, and European enterprises, providing a chance to exchange knowledge and information on how to tackle psychosocial risks at work and to discuss related policy issues.

The experience of the social partners has shown that the most effective way to tackle psychosocial risks is to encourage and pursue a partnership approach at the national, European, and international level. One of the aims

of the Agency is to encourage the translation of knowledge and research into practical solutions at the enterprise level. Therefore, the focus of the morning session was the exchange of information and experiences between researchers and practitioners, whereas the afternoon was devoted to a discussion of policy issues by a round table of policy-makers.

The main objective of the closing event was to bring together the major players in the occupational health and safety community, seeking to promote effective collaborations to address psychosocial risks at work. The event succeeded in fostering partnerships, raising awareness and identifying success factors.



European Week 2002 Good Practice Awards.



'Work culture agreement' (Italy).

The Agency also wanted to recognise and reward those who are already taking effective action against psychosocial hazards, and therefore the event closed with the presentation of the European Week 2002 Good Practice Awards in a ceremony organised at the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. These annual awards aim to promote initiatives to reduce work-related risks and encourage further activities by disseminating good practice information at the European level.

**Good Practice Awards 2002: Award winners and commended entries**

Country	Title	Issue	Sector	Intervention Level (*)
Award winners				
Denmark	Stress and burnout prevention for teachers	stress	education	IO
Finland	Model for planning work rotas autonomously	stress	healthcare, work rotas	O/IO
France	Prevention plan for risks relating to third party violence in an urban transport company	violence	public transport	I/O
Germany	Introduction of a healthy and successful work organisation at a call centre	stress	call centre	ALL
Germany	GiGA — 'Joint initiative for healthier work'	stress/bullying	intermediary	ALL
Ireland	Intermediary strategy for prevention of bullying	bullying	intermediary	ALL
Netherlands	Welfare and stress prevention programme	stress	chemical manufacture	ALL
Netherlands	'Safe Care' — Programme for a safer hospital	violence	healthcare	ALL
Portugal	Critical incident stress management	post-traumatic stress	air traffic control	I
Spain	Stress prevention in an old people's home	stress	healthcare	ALL
United Kingdom	Simple steps to prevent stress at work	stress	petrochemical manufacturing	ALL
Commended entries				
Austria	Management training to reduce stress	stress	mining/quarrying	O/IO
Finland	Guidelines on prevention of psychological violence and intervention measures	bullying	base metals	O/IO
Finland	Model for handling bullying cases	bullying	intermediary	ALL
Greece	Managing stress and psychosocial risks	stress	Olympic games	ALL
Ireland	'Work positive' — stress audit tool suitable for SMEs	stress	intermediary, healthcare	ALL
Ireland	Management of violence against staff	violence	healthcare	ALL
Italy	'Work culture agreement'	bullying	public transport	IO
Sweden	Stress programme at the National Labour Market Board	stress	national labour market board	I/O
United Kingdom	Preventing work-related violence in the retail sector	violence	retailing	ALL

**(\*) Key to intervention level**  
 I Individual  
 IO Individual — Organisation  
 O Organisation  
 ALL All levels

**What the judges were looking for:**

In selecting the examples, the judging panel for the Agency competition looked for solutions that showed:

- tackling risks at source;
- real improvements;
- sustainability over time;
- good consultation between management and the workforce;
- compliance with relevant legal requirements, preferably going beyond minimum requirements; and
- possibility of transfer to other workplaces, preferably including those in other Member States and to SMEs.

**3. Workshops**

The most striking development over the last few decades in the world of work has been the changing nature of work itself, from manual to mental, with the consequent increase in mental workload. The changing world of work is characterised by new contractual relationships, the increasing use of information and communication technologies, and globalisation. Researchers in Europe have been successful in identifying methods to tackle physical hazards at work, but the increase in psychosocial problems requires an active approach to occupational safety and health (OSH) management that addresses the early stages of the problem.

The unifying theme across the workshop presentations was that psychosocial risks can be prevented. The experts

emphasised the existence of a common legal framework (EU directives), national and EU guidance <sup>(1)</sup>, and further policy developments, such as the new Community Strategy on Health and Safety at Work <sup>(2)</sup>, which states among its priorities the promotion of well-being and the prevention of psychosocial risks.

The workshops of the closing event were structured so that there would be a logical flow from expert knowledge on research to a state-of-the-art report on interventions. Each of the workshops concluded with two case studies to illustrate good practice in the management of stress, violence or bullying at work. A summary of the contribution from each invited speaker is provided in the following section, and the 'success factors' for interventions are highlighted for each of the three workshops.



Photo: European Agency for Safety and Health at Work

### 3.1. Workshop 1: Work-related stress

#### 3.1.1. Research

*Michiel Kompier (University of Nijmegen, The Netherlands)*

There is a wealth of theories and empirical studies on work, stress, motivation and performance. These studies indicate that stress and motivation can be regarded as two sides of the same coin. If work provides the right mix of work characteristics, it can stimulate motivation and mental health as well as productive performance: this 'right mix' would include demands which are high (but not too high), skill variety, control, social support and feedback, task identity, reasonable job security, and adequate pay. Healthy work is usually also productive work, but when work design fails to

provide a good balance of these characteristics (e.g. excessive demands, insufficient autonomy), stress reactions may occur. Chronic exposure to such risk factors and insufficient recovery may result in serious illness.

Stress research has a long and diverse tradition, but most researchers agree on some basic points:

- Occupational stress is a major problem for both employees and employers.
- The major risk factors for stress and its consequences for ill health are well established.
- There is national and international legislation on risk management that provides a sound basis for stress management interventions.

Having examined the available scientific literature, we may conclude that we do know enough to take preventive action against work stress.

#### 3.1.2. Interventions

*Amanda Griffiths (University of Nottingham, United Kingdom)*

The 1989 framework directive espouses a stepwise, problem-solving approach to the prevention and management of stress, similar to the well-known risk assessment for physical hazards. An effective translation of research into practice is required, together with the dissemination of existing good practice and the development of effective and user-friendly tools for organisations, especially small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). There are still unanswered questions as to the relative effectiveness of different types of preventative measures (e.g. awareness-raising campaigns, financial incentives, inspection, regulation). This emphasises the need to evaluate interventions.

#### What is risk assessment for work-related stress?

Risk assessment is designed to help employers and employees deal with psychosocial risks in an evidence-based but user-friendly manner. It involves:

- Assessment of risks
- Design of interventions
- Implementation and monitoring of interventions
- Evaluation and re-assessment

Risk assessment has been adapted to deal with psychosocial issues, promoting realistic improvements in the design and management of work. It reflects a holistic, organisational approach that involves both employers and employees.

In order to reinforce two-way communication between research and practice, employers, employees, researchers and practitioners should establish constructive partnerships, both at the national and supranational levels. Future developments should include a corporate social responsibility strategy, integrating awareness-raising measures and formal enforcement policies as crucial factors for effective stress prevention at work.

<sup>(1)</sup> European Commission (2000): *Guidance on work-related stress: spice of life or kiss of death?*

<sup>(2)</sup> Available in 10 languages at [http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment\\_social/news/2002/mar/new\\_strategy\\_en.html](http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/news/2002/mar/new_strategy_en.html)

### 3.1.3. Case studies

#### **Prospective workplace design (Municipal Savings Bank of Hannover, Germany)**

*Ralf Schweer (Verwaltungs-Berufsgenossenschaft, Hamburg, Germany)*

The Municipal Savings Bank of Hannover planned to establish an in-house call centre, and conducted a 'prospective risk assessment and workplace design' in collaboration with Verwaltungs-Berufsgenossenschaft. The rationale behind this initiative was the Bank's belief that good customer service could only be provided if financial and managerial aspects could be successfully combined with occupational health from the beginning. Before working procedures were implemented, a risk assessment was carried out to evaluate the employees' expected mental workload. Risk factors for inadequate mental workload were addressed in the work design process. The design was evaluated three and twelve months after its implementation, and it was concluded that the combination of risk assessment and prospective work design was a successful tool for the creation of healthy and productive call centres.



#### **Developing a mental health policy (Rolls-Royce plc, United Kingdom)**

*Sayed Khan (Engineering Employers Federation, United Kingdom)*

Rolls-Royce agreed a strategy to develop the company's Mental Health Policy with the aim of preserving its employees' psychological well-being. The strategy included a risk assessment approach using a hierarchy of control measures, and awareness-raising initiatives that included a booklet for managers on stress and one-day stress awareness workshops attended by over 2 000 managers and key

personnel. The company's intranet was also used as a tool to provide information on stress. In addition, help and advice were made available for managers on how to assist employees returning to work after being absent due to stress. There was some evidence of improvements with regard to measures and outcomes of stress, both qualitatively (e.g., use of occupational health services) and quantitatively (decrease in sickness absence).

#### **Tackling work-related stress: success factors**

1. The use of prevention-focused interventions at the organisational level. These are more sustainable than rehabilitation or individual-level interventions.
2. Interventions should reflect a holistic organisational approach.
3. A sound risk assessment is vital for the design of stress interventions.
4. Commitment, involvement and support from top management are crucial.
5. Training and advice should always be provided.
6. Evaluation is essential to ascertain the sustainability of efforts.
7. Research evidence can be used to identify and share good practice.
8. Constructive partnerships at all levels are important for the co-ordination of efforts.

*The Chair of the workshop was Lennart Levi (Karolinska Institutet, Sweden), and the Rapporteur was Eleftheria Lehmann (Landesanstalt für Arbeitsschutz des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen, Germany).*

### 3.2. Workshop 2: Work-related bullying

#### 3.2.1. Research

*Ståle Einarsen (University of Bergen, Norway)*

Bullying is a gradually evolving problem that can be defined as a situation where there is 'persistent treatment in an oppressive, abusive, intimidating, or insulting manner over a period of time'.

#### **Bullying at work: key facts**

- Around 5–10% of the European workforce report having been bullied in the previous 12 months.
- Bullying can occur regardless of the gender or age of the victim. However, large, male-dominated organisations seem to be most at risk, with men seen as offenders more often.
- It can have extremely negative effects on the victim by affecting their perceptions of the work environment and their entire outlook on life.

- Bullying can result in severe stress, mental and physical health problems, post traumatic stress disorder, and increased sickness absence.
- It can also affect co-workers and the whole organisation, leading to decreased group productivity, job satisfaction and motivation, and higher absenteeism and turnover.

Some of the roots of bullying can be found in problems of work design, incompetent management and leadership, work that exposes the victim socially, a hostile work climate, and a culture that allows or rewards bullying. Competent leadership and constructive conflict management are important in creating a positive psychosocial environment. Finally, some of the causes of bullying lie beyond the individual and organisational levels. These societal and cultural issues also need to be addressed in order to combat bullying at work effectively.

### 3.2.2. Interventions

*José María Peiró (University of Valencia, Spain)*

Many of the interventions designed to tackle workplace bullying have originated from the stress management tradition. Additionally, groups such as trade unions and self-help associations have played an important role in raising awareness and designing programmes to prevent bullying. Interventions can be classified according to their level and focus: they can take place at the level of the individual, the work group, the organisation, or the wider community (social partners, Member States, etc.), and they can be aimed at:

- prevention (e.g. social skills and conflict management training, work redesign, improving the organisational culture, leadership training);
- reaction during the occurrence of bullying (focused on the bully, the victim, or the organisational procedures available to deal with the problem, such as employee assistance programmes);
- rehabilitation or correction measures (e.g. counselling, social and legal compensation).

The evaluation of the effectiveness of different interventions has to be improved, and it would be helpful to be able to establish common sets of indicators across the EU. Experience suggests that it is important to:

- carry out an adequate risk analysis as a first step to the design of context-specific solutions;
- analyse the social context and the interests of the various parties;
- promote awareness of the problem in the wider community, being aware of its human and economic costs and of the effects that it can have on the whole organisation;
- focus on 'at risk groups' (e.g. women);
- widely disseminate information on the problem and its prevention and management;

- involve the social partners in dialogue and prevention programmes;
- implement a strategy for corporate social responsibility.

### 3.2.3. Case studies

#### **Implementation of an anti-bullying policy (City of Helsinki and Outokumpu Poricopper, Finland)**

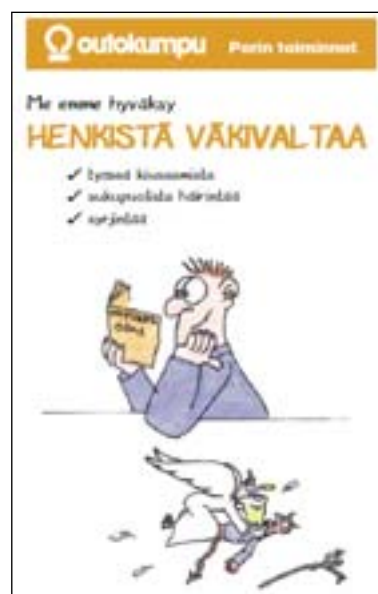
*Maarit Vartia (Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, Finland)*

During the past few years, numerous organisations in Finland have devised and implemented policies and guidelines on how to act in bullying situations. These policies include many common themes, such as:

- a definition of bullying;
- a statement that any form of bullying and harassment is unacceptable in the organisation;
- examples of bullying and non-bullying behaviour;
- instructions on how to proceed when faced with bullying.

In Finland, it is the responsibility of the supervisor to act as soon as they have been informed of a bullying incident. Outokumpu Poricopper, a leading metals and technology company, and the City of Helsinki introduced a bullying policy, together with a set of related guidelines. These are large organisations — employing over 47 200 people — and to ensure that the implementation of the policies had been effective, a survey was sent to employees, employers, and OSH personnel.

Results showed that the general attitude towards bullying policies was positive, and that the policy was perceived as important and useful. It was clear, however, that in large organisations much effort must be spent on the dissemination of information, and that staff training should be ongoing. Supervisors' experience and knowledge of how to deal with bullying can prevent subsequent occurrences, especially where bullying has not escalated very far and the situation can be settled through discussion and agreement.



Employer and employee involvement is crucial to ensure long-term commitment to the policy. Supervisors (who have the responsibility to act upon reports of bullying) and OSH personnel must receive adequate training and support on how to deal with bullies and their victims, personally and within the organisation. The existence of a policy

on bullying can, by itself, induce attitude change and the acceptance of the existence of the problem, as well as providing the motivation to deal with it.

### **Policy on behaviour at work (Airbus UK)**

*Ian Barr (Airbus UK, United Kingdom)*

A study on bullying at work was carried out at Airbus UK (Airbus Industries' site in the United Kingdom) during 2001, aiming to assess the scale of the problem. Due to the perceived increase in the occurrence of bullying, the company agreed to introduce a policy ('Behaviour at work') as a method of intervention. It was clear that a culture shift was required to provide a working environment that would make individuals feel safe and secure from any psychosocial risks. The explicit aims of the intervention were:

- to deal with bullying at work in a professional way;
- to outline a procedure allowing for independent investigation and disciplinary action;
- to provide fair treatment for all employees;
- to introduce trained personnel to deal with individuals in a confidential and professional manner.

It is worth emphasising that, although aimed specifically at bullying, the intervention formed part of a broader attempt at reducing psychosocial risks within the workplace. This was formally recognised with the introduction of the figure of 'Work/life balance advisor' within the organisation. When the implementation of the policy was evaluated, it was apparent that there was inconsistency in the disciplinary procedures used to deal with cases of bullying. As a result, further guidance was issued to managers on how to deal with the disciplinary element of the intervention. It was clear that a system of continuous development and monitoring of policies should be implemented. It is also considered vital that current research be applied to the workplace for best practice within industry.

#### **Tackling work-related bullying: success factors**

1. An active anti-bullying policy can be a preventive measure in itself.
2. The development of policy and guidelines has to be an ongoing process, with periodic reviews.
3. Information on policy implementation should be well disseminated to all key parties.
4. There needs to be a partnership approach to tackling workplace bullying, involving the social partners and all other relevant parties.
5. Line managers need to be aware of their responsibilities and the organisation's policies.
6. When a policy is introduced, its implementation and the level of awareness amongst managers and key parties should be reviewed.
7. Two-way communication between researchers and practitioners fosters good practice in the workplace.

*The Chair of the workshop was Christa Sedlatschek (European Agency for Safety and Health at Work), and the Rapporteur was Eusebio Rial-González (University of Nottingham, United Kingdom).*

### **3.3. Workshop 3: Work-related violence**

#### **3.3.1. Research**

*Phil Leather (University of Nottingham, United Kingdom)*

There is a growing world-wide concern about violence as one of the most serious occupational hazards in the 21st Century. This affects particularly all occupational groups who deal in some way with the general public.

#### **Violence at work: key facts**

- Four per cent of the active working population report having been victims of physical violence from outside the organisation in the previous 12 months.
- Some risk factors: working with the public, handling money, working alone.
- Common consequences of violent incidents: injury, stress, post traumatic stress, sickness absence, poorer job performance.
- The consequences can be extremely serious for both the individual and the organisation.
- Violence is a global problem, with implications for employees' health and well being, organisations' productivity and reputation, and countries' economies and health services.

Too often, unfortunately, it is only when a physical assault takes place that the organisation feels compelled to do something about the issue, especially when it is a legally reportable assault resulting in physical injuries. This attitude constitutes a poor basis for decision-making. A broad, inclusive definition is crucial for designing interventions and developing policies to address the problem. Effective interventions should match the organisation's particular circumstances, and be informed by thorough risk assessments. Both assessments and interventions should take place within an integrated organisational approach: actions should be targeted at the organisational, group and individual levels, and be designed to take place before, during and after the incidents. Finally, enhanced monitoring and reporting mechanisms are required at Member State and EU levels if we are to obtain a true, dynamic picture of the situation with regard to violence at work.

#### **3.3.2. Interventions**

*Vittorio di Martino (International consultant, Italy)*

There is growing awareness that confronting stress and violence requires a comprehensive approach. Work-related violence is a not merely an episodic, individual issue, but also a structural problem rooted in wider organisational, social, economic and cultural factors.

A response based on the combined development of the enterprise and the individual is progressively emerging, whereby workers' health, safety and well-being become integral parts of enterprise growth. An interlinked and holistic approach to the management of violence should promote and enforce regulation, create a preventing culture by developing and encouraging corporate social responsibility, and foster networks and partnerships at all levels. This integrated approach recognises that there is no 'one best way' to tackle work-related violence, but that there is a role to play for work practices (prevention), conflict management training (timely reaction), and the provision of post-incident support (rehabilitation).

Whatever action is taken must be evaluated, so that lessons can be learnt to inform and improve all aspects of intervention. Policies should sustain this holistic approach providing stimulation and encouragement, raising awareness, and offering guidelines, best practices, and references to legislation where necessary. In this field, improving working conditions goes hand in hand with reducing costs and enhancing productivity: a win-win situation.

### 3.3.3. Case studies

#### **The 'Safe Care' project (Westfries Gasthuis, The Netherlands)**

*Jan Franx (Beleidsadviseur Arboconvenant Ziekenhuizen, The Netherlands)*

Violent incidents within hospitals are on the rise. Over half of the 200 000 doctors and nurses employed in the 101 general and 42 specialist hospitals in the Netherlands have received armed threats. Over 90% have experienced psychological or physical violence, and over 80% have experienced sexual harassment.

The Safe Care project implemented at the Westfries Gasthuis hospital includes a firm policy on aggression and violence, structured around a 'card system' [see box]. Other important features of the programme are privacy protection,

improvement of safety aspects within hospitals (including cameras which are activated when an alarm button is pressed by staff) and training in aggression control.

#### **The 'card system'**

Violent incidents are classified into 3 different types, and dealt with accordingly:

- **Verbal aggression** (e.g. swearing, threatening behaviour, non-serious threats, sexual intimidation). Staff try to calm the patient/visitor and then record the incident. If this is not possible, assistance is sought by means of an alarm button. The incident is then recorded.
- **Serious threats** (e.g. threatening families, threatening with an object, attempting to injure, using discriminatory remarks). The alarm button is pressed immediately. Security staff intervene, record the incident and issue a 'yellow card'. The incident is always reported to the police.
- **Physical violence** (assault, smashing furniture, throwing objects, preventing individuals from leaving the room, pushing, biting or scratching, striking, kicking, inflicting injury, etc.). The alarm button is pressed immediately. Security staff intervene, record the incident and issue a 'red card'. The incident is reported to the police and the attacker is brought before the public prosecutor. This process may result in the perpetrator being banned from entering the hospital except for emergency or psychiatric treatment.

In the first hospital where Safe Care was implemented in 2000, the number of incidents of physical violence was reduced by 30%, and verbal violence by 27%. The programme is currently being implemented in other hospitals in the Netherlands and has proven to be a very effective tool for the management of violence.

#### **Preventing violence in public transport (Saint Etienne, France)**

*Yves Grasset (Société de Transport Saint Etienne, France)*

The regional Public Transport Service of Saint Etienne (STAS) developed a programme in 1997 with the aim of preventing violence in the public transport system. The programme enjoyed full support from the organisation and all the stakeholders. It was designed as a preventive policy involving regular information exchange with the public in a clear and informal way.

The main points of the programme included increased human presence in all public areas, close cooperation with the police and the justice system, partnership with the trade unions, clear communication, victim support and a strong focus on prevention. Considerable improvements during the first 3 years of the programme showed that a collaborative approach is very effective and sustainable in the prevention of violence at work.







From left to right: Claus Hjort Frederiksen, Danish Minister for Employment, Hans Horst Konkolewsky, Director of the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work, Juan Chozas Pedrero, Secretary of State for Employment, Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs.

#### Tackling work-related violence: success factors

1. An integrated organisational approach is required to prevent and manage violence and its underlying causes.
2. Prevention-focused, sustainable actions are more effective than 'corrective' solutions.
3. Intervention programmes should have clear objectives and standards, which should be regularly monitored to evaluate their effectiveness.
4. Written agreements, policies and timetables for the implementation of interventions — reflecting the commitment of all stakeholders — are necessary to achieve effective solutions.
5. Effective alliances with the social partners, enforcement agencies, researchers and practitioners bring about long-lasting benefits.

*The Chair of the workshop was Janet Asherson (Confederation of British Industry, United Kingdom) and the Rapporteur was Kaisa Kauppinen (Finnish Institute of Occupational Health, Finland).*

#### 3.4. Workshop conclusions

'The fact that classical occupational diseases still occur does not automatically mean that more research is needed. What it really means is that we have failed to implement already existing knowledge.'

Sven Hernberg (1984), former Director of Research at the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health.

Stress, violence and bullying affect millions of workers, either directly or indirectly, as well as their organisations. The human, economic and social costs of psychosocial risks are enormous. However, effective interventions to tackle them do exist, and the European Week 2002 Good Practice Award winners are examples of successful translations of knowledge into practical solutions.

The three workshops identified a number of conclusions and key success factors, which were presented to the colloquium and round table policy-makers for discussion:

1. The creation of a prevention culture is essential, and it should emphasise corporate social responsibility.
2. Prevention-focused approaches are more sustainable than isolated, individual-level measures.
3. Employee involvement is a key factor in achieving sustainable solutions. An integrated risk management approach based on workforce participation and training is necessary for the design and successful implementation of actions to tackle stress, bullying and violence.
4. There is a need for enhanced monitoring and reporting mechanisms at the workplace and at the national and EU levels.
5. An assessment of the infrastructure, expertise and resources available for the management of psychosocial risks at work is needed at national and European levels.

#### 4. Round table

The round table discussion was moderated by David Eves (*former Deputy Director General of the Health and Safety Executive, Great Britain*), with contributions from representatives of the employees, employers, policy-makers and OSH experts:

- **Manuel Pérez Álvarez** (*Member of the Employment and Social Affairs Committee, European Parliament*);
- **Bernhard Jansen** (*European Commission, Directorate-General for Employment and Social Affairs*);
- **Leodegario Fernández Sánchez** (*National Institute for Safety and Health at Work, Spain*);
- **Jens Jensen** (*Danish Working Environment Authority, Denmark*);
- **Matina Pissimissi** (*Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, Greece*);
- **Natascha Waltke** (*Representative of UNICE*);
- **Marc Sapir** (*Representative of ETUC*);
- **Tom Cox** (*University of Nottingham, United Kingdom; Member of the Agency's Topic Centre 'Good Practice Systems and Programmes'*).

The round table discussed the policy implications of the conclusions of the morning workshops, and how these may be translated into effective policies for the future. This section includes a short summary of some of the round table members' contributions.

When asked about the most important tasks for authorities, **Jens Jensen** suggested that:

'Prevention should be carried out through the laying down of a series of minimum requirements to enterprises regarding their handling of the most critical psychosocial risk factors. It is then left to enterprises, with support from the social partners, occupational health services, and the Danish Working Environment Authority, to develop the most efficient preventative methods.'

Prevention of psychosocial problems requires methods different from those used to prevent physical hazards. It is therefore of decisive importance that prevention of psychosocial problems allows for commitment, openness, and innovative thinking in the development of new methods and forms of cooperation in enterprises — as well as between enterprises, the social partners and government authorities.'

**Manuel Pérez Álvarez** commented on the changing nature of occupational hazards:

'The right to dignity is recognised in the EU as a fundamental principle, and the legislation stipulates that all workers have the right to work in conditions that respect their health, safety and dignity. However, there is no such thing as "zero risk". Occupational hazards still remain, and they also change, including the emergence of psychosocial hazards. It is our responsibility to anticipate and prevent stress and bullying at work. The European Agency must be congratulated for their

initiative on psychosocial risks at work, which will contribute to foster a culture of prevention.'

**Leodegario Fernández Sánchez** spoke about the relationship between legislative instruments and society:

'As is often the case, society is ahead of current legislation. The legislative process requires time, and, in scientific fields such as occupational safety and health, also detailed consideration of the scientific evidence at the disposal of policy-makers and legislators. There is also always a need for social dialogue and consultation to inform the process.'

In his answer to the question of whether the EU should prepare specific legislation regarding work-related stress, **Bernhard Jansen** indicated that:

'The Commission has published guidance on work-related stress in order to facilitate the implementation of prevention and control measures. The Commission will also open a consultation process with the EU trade union and employers on stress and its impact on health and safety at work. The Commission will explore the appropriateness of incorporating the issue of stress-related illness into the employment guidelines for 2003.'

Discussing the various instruments which can contribute significantly to the promotion of OSH issues, **Matina Pissimissi** commented:

'Among these instruments, legislation and enforcement seem to be the strongest. However, we think that the area of psychosocial risks is still not mature for specific legislation of binding nature. For the moment, we can rely on the framework directive, which states that "the employers have the duty to ensure the safety and health of workers in every aspect related to the work". This requirement leaves room for measures that can be flexible, qualitative and adjusted to the special needs of workers and of the enterprises. Workers become able to identify the sources of psychosocial risks and contribute with appropriate suggestions.'

Continuing the dialogue on legislation, **Natascha Waltke** observed that:

'The causes, nature, and outcomes of psychosocial risks are complex and can differ widely across work and organisational contexts. Due to this variability, specific legislation on the prevention of psychosocial risks at work is not helpful. On the contrary, a flexible and adaptive approach that will provide practical solutions, tools, and guidelines can be more effective for prevention at the company level.'

**Marc Sapir** indicated that psychosocial risks should be seen in the context of work organisation, and that there is a pressing need for action and social dialogue:

'We should not really consider psychosocial problems an "emergent" risk: statistics show that a third of workers lack control over their work and adequate social support. This is compounded by, for example, the difficulty in reconciling work life and family life, especially with the

growth in short-term, temporary contracts. Action is needed now at the enterprise, sector and national level, through social dialogue built around the framework directive. We need to reinforce the legislative instruments, and also to find tools and instruments for the inspection bodies.'

Moving the discussion on to practical solutions, **Tom Cox** described how risk management techniques could be made more attractive to companies as a tool for prevention:

'Companies should be educated, first, by understanding their duties in law, and, second, by acquiring the skills and knowledge to use available prevention techniques. Information dissemination is important in this respect. Companies need to understand that general organisational healthiness and competitiveness and the reduction of risks to individual health are interrelated goals. Investment in education and training are important steps in this direction.'

## 5. Overall conclusions and future plans

- The framework directive's requirement for adequate risk assessment is a sound basis for preventing psychosocial hazards. Nevertheless, it is necessary to develop appropriate tools and practices to fulfil this obligation, especially in the case of SMEs.
- Successful preventive measures must address the crucial issue of work organisation and working conditions.
- The case studies presented in the workshops and those receiving Good Practice Awards are very encouraging. Evaluation of existing good practice should be promoted, as it will facilitate the identification of success factors and their systematic dissemination.
- Future success in this area requires setting up an active network of researchers, policy-makers, social partners and OSH professionals to facilitate a continuous exchange of experiences and information on good practice.
- The momentum of the European Week 2002 should continue to be translated into concrete actions. The success of the European Week in raising awareness of psychosocial risks should be followed by further initiatives by the public authorities and social partners at national and enterprise level.
- Effective decision-making at European level requires a good knowledge base. An effective occupational safety and health monitoring system would need to include psychosocial risks. The 'Risk Observatory' to be set up by the European Agency will contribute to this purpose. It might be useful to introduce a common assessment tool in order to compare the results of interventions taking place in enterprises across the EU.

- Learning about well-being at work and psychosocial risk should form an integral part of education and training curricula, particularly for future managers and for OSH professionals.

'Health and safety at work are one of the pillars of European social policy and an essential component of the European employment strategy.'

*(Bernhard Jansen, Directorate General for Employment and Social Affairs, European Commission)*

The framework directive, with its strong emphasis on prevention, must be considered as the keystone of the Community's policy for the promotion of well-being at work. It covers psychosocial risks and establishes the employer's obligation to identify possible risks to workers' health, and to implement all the necessary measures for eliminating or reducing them. The Commission has issued guidance on work-related stress, which also makes reference to bullying. Building upon this legislative framework, several important developments are taking place:

### Current and future developments

- The European social partners (UNICE and ETUC) announced at the closing event that they will be organising a seminar on stress in 2003 to discuss joint action. This will be followed by a similar initiative on harassment in 2004.
- The Commission will examine the desirability of a Community instrument on bullying and violence at work.
- The European Social Agenda (agreed at the Nice European Council) identified the need to 'respond to new risks such as work-related stress, by initiatives on standards and exchanges of good practice' <sup>(3)</sup>. The Commission has therefore opened a consultation process with the EU trade unions and employers on stress and its impact on health and safety at work. The Commission will explore 'the appropriateness of the integration of the problem of stress-related complaints and illnesses into the employment guidelines for 2003' <sup>(4)</sup>.
- During the first phase of consultation, the social partners have been invited to give their opinion about the suitability of adopting an initiative at EU level. They have also been asked for their views as to whether the measures should be of a voluntary or binding nature.

<sup>(3)</sup> [http://europa.eu.int/council/off/conclu/dec2000/dec2000\\_en.htm#a1](http://europa.eu.int/council/off/conclu/dec2000/dec2000_en.htm#a1)

<sup>(4)</sup> Consultation document available from <http://agency.osha.eu.int/misc/news030113.pdf>

## 6. Further Information

- The Agency's report on 'Prevention of psychosocial risks and stress at work in practice' provides more information about the case studies featured in this issue, and many more from 13 Member States. This report is available from <http://agency.osha.eu.int/publications/reports/104/en/index.htm>.
- A report on 'How to tackle psychosocial issues and reduce work-related stress' is available from <http://agency.osha.eu.int/publications/reports/309/en/index.htm>. This report describes a number of good practice examples from

Member States on the prevention of stress, bullying, and violence, and highlights the success criteria that can be applied to different situations and environments in attempts to address such problems.

- For further information on the European Week 2002 closing event (including the full proceedings) please visit: <http://osha.eu.int/ew2002>.
- The Agency's web site has a section devoted entirely to good practice solutions for occupational safety and health issues: [http://europe.osha.eu.int/good\\_practice](http://europe.osha.eu.int/good_practice).



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