

Managing dangerous substances top of agenda for OSH experts at Healthy Workplaces Summit Bilbao, 12-13 November 2019

At the 2019 Healthy Workplaces Summit, held in Bilbao, Spain, the management of dangerous substances took centre stage, as the European Agency for Safety and Health at Work (EU-OSHA) and its partners reflected on the achievements of its Healthy Workplaces Manage Dangerous Substances campaign. This year's summit not only marked the end of a highly successful 2-year campaign — reaching a wider audience than ever before with unprecedented levels of engagement — but was also the grand finale of a year of 25th anniversary celebrations for the Agency and the 10th anniversary of official campaign partnership.



Millions of people across Europe are exposed to dangerous substances at work each year, some without even knowing it. This puts many workers at risk of developing serious, sometimes fatal, occupational diseases, including cancer. So, what can be done to protect workers and ensure that legislation meant to eliminate risks is implemented? With its latest campaign, EU-OSHA and its partners aimed to raise awareness of this issue and create a culture of prevention by providing easy-to-use tools and guidance materials and encouraging the sharing of best practice.

More than 260 participants attended the summit in Bilbao to reflect on the campaign's achievements and

express their commitment to tackling the challenges that lie ahead. Moreover, live web streaming ensured that people across the world could tune in and participate along with delegates in interactive audience polls and Q&A sessions. Recordings of the sessions, as well as speakers' presentations, can now be accessed [online](#).



With representatives from the European Commission, the Spanish and Basque governments, national focal points, official campaign partners and media partners, social partners and good practice award winning and commended organisations, it was a truly collaborative event. This wide range of perspectives ensured enlightening plenary and parallel discussion sessions and sparked valuable debate and productive networking during the course of the 2 days — a fitting tribute to the value of the Agency's network and tripartite way of working.

Opening session

EU-OSHA's Brussels Liaison Office Manager, **Brenda O'Brien**, moderated the 2-day event and opened the summit by welcoming all, both those in attendance in Bilbao and those watching online from countries as far afield as the United States and Zimbabwe.

Executive Director **Dr Christa Sedlatschek** reiterated Ms O'Brien's welcoming words and added her own special thanks to the many partners whose 'active and

engaged involvement contributed to the campaign's enormous success in helping workplaces to identify and manage the risks posed by dangerous substances. She paid tribute to the national focal points and official campaign partners for their efforts in organising hundreds of activities and events, reaching tens of thousands of people, to raise awareness of dangerous substances and promote the campaign's resources, making a real difference at national and workplace levels. She also highlighted her appreciation of two of EU-OSHA's sister agencies — the European Chemicals Agency (ECHA) and the European Environment Agency (EEA) — whose own commitment to tackling this issue and will to collaborate with EU-OSHA had *'increased the campaign's reach and impact immeasurably'*.

Dr Sedlatschek reflected on the value of the Agency's close working relationship with the European Commission and expressed her particular gratitude to Marianne Thyssen, former European Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility, *'for her support and dedication to the Agency's work'* over the years. She also looked ahead to continuing this collaborative working with Nicolas Schmit, Commissioner for Jobs and Social Rights, assuring the audience that, in this currently changing political landscape, EU-OSHA will work *'to keep up with changes and ensure that occupational safety and health remain high on the political agenda'*.

Stefan Olsson, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, offered his congratulations to the Agency on its 25th anniversary and on the success of the campaign. He praised the *'in-depth thinking'* behind the campaigns and the Agency's *'professional approach to communication'*, which ensures that its campaigns get important messages across and have the intended impact. He also emphasised the particular importance of the objectives of the 2018-19 campaign, given the *'enormous human suffering'* caused and severe economic consequences of failing to protect workers from dangerous substances. The Commission's commitment to tackling this issue is reflected in its ambitious and ongoing work to develop and update legislation, for instance on occupational exposure limit values and preventing work-related cancer. However, such legislation can be effective only if it is understood and implemented. This is where EU-OSHA comes in, with Mr Olsson expressing his conviction that its achievements are *'proof of how an EU agency can change things on the ground in line with policy development'*.

Other valued supporters of EU-OSHA's work also emphasised their gratitude to the Agency and its network of partners for their dedication to the campaign and to occupational safety and health (OSH) in general over the past 25 years:

- Saila Ruuth, State Secretary from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, representing the Finnish EU Council Presidency, via a video message;
- Yolanda Valdeolivas, acting Secretary of State of Employment, Ministry of Labour, Migrations and Social Security from the Spanish Government;
- María Jesús San José, Minister of Employment and Justice from the Basque Government;
- Ignacio Doreste, Advisor at the European Trade Union Confederation;
- Kris De Meester, Chair of the Health and Safety Group from BusinessEurope.

Each of these speakers presented their own perspective on tackling dangerous substances and explained how the work of their organisations ties in with the campaign. There was a general consensus that the campaign served to successfully *'bring together those involved in policy-making and policy implementation'*, making an important contribution to raising awareness of worker exposure to dangerous substances, translating complicated legislation into simple language and promoting instruments to help businesses, particularly micro, small and medium-sized enterprises, comply with such legislation.

Healthy Workplaces Good Practice Awards ceremony

A highlight of the summit — and indeed of the campaign — was the **Healthy Workplaces Good Practice Awards ceremony**, an opportunity to recognise and promote good practice and congratulate this campaign's awarded and commended organisations.

Good practice exchange is a key element of any Healthy Workplaces Campaign and **Mats Ryderheim**, chair of the Good Practice Awards jury, explained what the 2018-19 jury were looking for: examples of *'innovative and effective management of the handling and use of dangerous substances'*.



In particular, the jury were impressed by examples that:

- prioritised collective over personal protective measures;
- had the commitment of management and involved worker participation;
- had been successfully implemented and were sustainable;
- went above and beyond legislative requirements;
- could be transferred to other companies or organisations, particularly small businesses.

EU-OSHA received 42 applications from 25 countries and, of these, [six organisations were awarded and four were commended](#). Mr Ryderheim explained that the jury was particularly pleased that two of the six awarded organisations were small businesses — a family-run farming business from the Netherlands, which, in collaboration with the sectoral safety and health body, implemented a series of measures to protect workers from harmful dust, and a small Spanish hairdressing salon, which substituted hazardous products with less hazardous ones and contributed to creating a culture of safe, healthy and sustainable working in the hairdressing sector across Spain. The success of these examples in particular demonstrates that — with the commitment of management and workers — any business of any size can effectively assess risks and implement measures to address them. There was a clear sense of achievement among the representatives of all the awarded organisations as they received their awards. Many emphasised that taking part in the competition and receiving this recognition was *'immensely inspirational'* and *'motivated them to continue'* to improve safety and health in their organisations and encourage others to do the same. The audience joined Mr Ryderheim in congratulating the winners with enthusiastic applause and cheers as Christa Sedlatschek and Stefan Olson presented the trophies.

Parallel sessions

To round off the first day, participants could choose to attend one of four interactive sessions, held in parallel, on a variety of topics related to the campaign theme: 'Carcinogens at work', 'Good practices and interventions', 'Sustainable management and substitution of dangerous substances in production processes' and 'Main challenges for effective prevention'. Each session was chaired by a member of EU-OSHA staff and featured presentations from official campaign partners, social partners and other experts. Delegates actively participated in the discussions that followed, allowing a range of perspectives on the issues covered to be voiced and debated.

Elke Schneider, Senior Project Manager at EU-OSHA, who chaired the session '**Carcinogens at work**', explained how managing the risks posed by dangerous substances that are process generated or not covered by chemicals legislation can be *'particularly challenging'*. Informing workers of the risks is vital — but the risks must first be identified and then communicated to everyone involved in an easy-to-understand way, so that a preventive approach can be taken and risks to workers avoided. The tools developed by the organisations represented in this session aimed to do just that. **Marion Jaros** of the Vienna Ombuds Office for Environmental Protection, Austria, highlighted the development and successful implementation of a database for the city's public procurement staff, designed to allow hazardous disinfectants to be substituted with effective products that pose less risk to human health and the environment. The database — the use of which has now been made binding by a legislative decree — has led to a remarkable reduction in the use of hazardous disinfectants, including those with carcinogenic properties, in the city's schools, hospitals and other



public buildings. The value of this tool — which is free to use, regularly updated and transferable to other sectors globally — was commended at this year's Healthy Workplaces Good Practice Awards.

Nuria Jiménez Simon showed an online tool developed by the National Institute for Safety and Health at Work (INSST), Spain, to identify the risks posed by hazardous drugs, including cytotoxic drugs, to workers in the healthcare sector. **Darren Arkins** presented a simple-to-apply guidance for labour inspectors aimed at addressing the health risks associated with welding. It was developed by the working group Chemex of the Senior Labour Inspectors' Committee, supported by the EU Commission and will be available in all official languages soon.

Members of the Advisory Committee on Safety and Health at Work's Working Party Chemicals welcomed the '*transferable, practical tools*' presented. **Sirkku Saarikoski** of the Finnish Ministry of Social Affairs and Health and **Tony Musu** of the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI) agreed on the importance of worker involvement and sharing information on specific risks and good practices. In Finland, cytotoxic drugs will be included in the national legislation on carcinogens and the ASA register of workers exposed to carcinogens will be digitalised, and these initiatives are expected to provide a better protection of workers and better evidence base on exposure. Tony Musu highlighted the importance of European legislation and the commitment of the ETUC to further development, and the importance of tackling risks from reprotoxic substances,

As emphasised by **Martin Wieske**, Head of Occupational Health and Safety, German Non-ferrous Metals Association, these tools provide examples of practical approaches to addressing long-term challenges, but also highlight the need to consider all aspects of workplace exposure to carcinogens to effectively identify and communicate the risks. In Germany, a new technical rule will address the risks from welding fumes and this is complementary to the EU guidance.

In the parallel session '**Good practices and interventions**', **Tim Tregenza**, Senior Network Manager at EU-OSHA, chaired the session that focused on the effectiveness of interventions by OSH professionals: how can visual workplace inspections

be improved to ensure that legislation is being effectively implemented; how can enterprises be encouraged to substitute dangerous substances for less dangerous ones; and how can the risks posed by dangerous substances be effectively communicated to workers. The challenges and success factors were considered and the audience engaged in lively debate, providing further insight on the topic. **Victor Hrymak**, lecturer in Environmental Health and Safety, Technical University, Dublin, explained how we may '*look but don't see*', resulting in a large number of workplace hazards being missed. He argued the case for a simple yet structured, systematic approach to visual inspection, and presented evidence demonstrating that this can improve the accuracy of visual inspection thus making best use of the often limited time available for those making workplace inspections. The elimination or substitution of dangerous substances is top of the hierarchy of prevention and should always be done if possible, but many workplaces, particularly small businesses, find this challenging. **Raluca Aurora Stepa**, Head of the Chemical Risks Laboratory, National Research and Development Institute on Occupational Safety (ICDPM), Romania, set out some good practice examples of awareness-raising initiatives and guidance, but explained that change is a '*long-term process and requires ongoing, network-based support*'. As always, with any intervention, communication is key — getting '*the right information across, in the right format, at the right time, in the right language by the right people*' — as summarised Tim Tregenza and highlighted by **Emilia Telo**, national focal point coordinator, Working Conditions Authority (ACT), Portugal, who illustrated the value of using a variety of media channels.

Substitution was the focus of parallel session 3, '**Sustainable management and substitution of dangerous substances in production processes**', which, as **Regine Mägerlein**, Senior Regional Manager, Environment, Health and Safety, ZF Friedrichshafen AG, explained, aimed to facilitate knowledge exchange on the '*prevention of harm to workers and the environment from dangerous substances in industry and its supply chains*'. She touched upon the challenges of '*balancing product safety, health and environmental aspects, and costs*', and demonstrated how her own organisation successfully managed this by developing a new technology for automobile brake pad production. Not only did this eliminate the use of 150 tonnes of solvents and the production of 20 tonnes of hazardous waste

each year, it also reduced noise levels, made cleaning and maintenance work easier, increased productivity and resulted in significant cost savings — thus making a clear business case for investing in technologies that eliminate the use of dangerous substances.

Managing dangerous substances in the manufacturing industry can be complex, however, as **Fernando Lopes**, Delphi Technologies, and **Hugues Leloix**, PSA Group, explained, again using the automotive industry as an example. With a car containing more than 30,000 parts, there is a high degree of complexity in manufacturing processes, in suppliers and raw materials, and in regulations and end consumer expectations. To solve some of the challenges this presents, several car manufacturers have worked together to develop the International Material Data System — a database through which suppliers are contractually obliged to provide details of all materials used in automobile manufacturing. This allows manufacturers to *'trace hazardous substances back to the individual part and work with suppliers to reduce, control or eliminate the hazard'*.

Christina Matthes of Air Products and **Erika Ustailieva** of Cosanta gave a presentation on the sustainable management of dangerous substances in the industrial gas industry. The easy-to-use risk assessment tool Stoffenmanager is available in different languages and allows sharing of information between business groups.

As chair **Dietmar Elsler**, Project Manager at EU-OSHA, pointed out, this is a clear illustration of the power of collaboration and the influence of the supply chain in driving the substitution of dangerous substances in production processes. The importance of following the STOP principle — which makes substitution a priority — sharing and implementing best practices, involve workers and respect the precautionary principle as a basis for *'vision zero accidents and diseases strategies'* was reiterated by **Marian Schaapman**, ETUI. However, she also sees the risk of vision zero approaches that they could lead to underreporting incentives and therefore should be embedded in a holistic prevention culture.

In the fourth parallel session, **'Main challenges for effective prevention'**, delegates looked at what progress has been made towards reducing workplace exposure to dangerous substances, what impact regulatory instruments such as REACH (Registration,

Evaluation, Authorisation and Restriction of Chemicals) have had and how we can learn from past experiences to ensure effective prevention in the future. More information on and awareness of dangerous substances and associated health risks, more open discussion about the feasibility of applying legislation, better connections between different *'regulatory silos'* and enhanced collaboration between REACH and OSH regulatory areas emerged as important considerations for future approaches to prevention, as summarised by chair **Lothar Lieck**, Senior Project Manager, EU-OSHA. **Dr Ioannis Basinas**, Senior Researcher at the Institute of Occupational Medicine presented data on the development of exposures to dangerous substances at European workplaces, using a data-driven and fast method to use public data and combining different databases. **Fesil Mushtaq** of ECHA informed about the impact of regulatory actions on substances under REACH. Such regulatory actions help to reduce the use of dangerous substances at workplaces and promote substitution. **Stefan Engel**, Director of Industrial Hygiene of BASF, on behalf of the Association of the German Chemical Industry, showed examples of the efforts of the Chemical Industry to be fully compliant with OSH-Legislation. He argued that a *'flexible combination of all types of controls including personal protective equipment is necessary and must be covered by European legislation'*. An alternative perspective was provided by panel member **Arnd Spahn**, Political Secretary for the Agriculture Sector, European Federation of Food, Agriculture and Tourism Trade Unions (EFFAT), who appealed to chemical manufacturers to *'take responsibility'*, *'support substitution'* and ensure that workers are informed in a language they understand about *'what they are using and what the effects are'*. Fellow panel member **Kris de Meester**, Chair of Health and Safety Group, BusinessEurope, agreed that the chemical industry has to play a major role in ensuring the sustainable use of chemicals, but emphasised the need for a *'holistic approach'* that connects policy measures with worker protection. He warned against relying on limit values alone, as *'stricter limit values do not necessarily mean better protected workers'*; what is important is that policy measures are translated into practical measures that keep workers safe and healthy.

Networking event

To give a fitting close to day 1 and allow more informal discussions and networking to continue, Bilbao's Museo Marítimo played host to an evening event, filled with music, dancing and delicious Basque cuisine.



Dr Christa Sedlatschek paid tribute to Bilbao, the city the Agency is proud to call home, and welcomed **Gotzone Sagardui**, Deputy Mayor of Bilbao, who provided delegates with some insight into the city's seven centuries of history and its remarkable transformation in recent decades into a '*bright, forward-looking city*'. She emphasised the Bilbao Town Hall's close and valued connection with EU-OSHA, driven by their shared values and beliefs of '*social justice, well-being and health, including in the workplace*', and reflected on 25 years of successful collaborative working while also looking ahead with optimism to many more to come.

Keynote speech: Dangerous substances — lessons from the past for the future

Stimulating plenary presentations and discussions continued on day 2. In an insightful and thought-provoking keynote speech, **Greet Schoeters**, Vice



Chair of the EEA Scientific Committee, emphasised the importance of being proactive when it comes to dealing with hazardous substances, to protect human health and the environment.

Lessons from the past illustrate the grave consequences of a failure to respond to early warnings, for instance in relation to asbestos and lead, substances that have caused serious harm to the health of millions through use even after evidence of their dangers had emerged. Professor Schoeters highlighted the complexities of the challenges: a lack of knowledge and uncertainties surrounding causality often delay action in response to early warnings, and the rapid speed of technology development makes it '*difficult for research and governance to keep up*' with the new compounds emerging all the time. She argued the case for creating a '*visionary and inclusive stakeholder approach to risk governance*', in which various policy areas — health, employment, environment, industry, and research and innovation — work together to gather '*all available knowledge*' and consider '*early warning signals of hazards*' from a range of sources. This should allow to '*harmonise legislation*' and create a culture of '*accountability, transparency, trust and comprehensive risk management*'.

Plenary panel discussion session

In the final plenary discussion session, the importance of a multidisciplinary approach to tackling dangerous substances involving all stakeholders was reiterated by members of the panel — **Zinta Podniece**, Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, **Tim Bowmer**, Chair of the Risk Assessment Committee, ECHA, **Martin Wieske**, German Non-ferrous Metals Association, and **Tony Musu**, Senior Researcher, ETUI. As participants reflected on the 2 days, it became clear that some common themes had emerged:

- Legislation should be strong, should be continually reviewed and amended to keep up with changing work practices and technologies.
- Legislation should also span various policy areas through collaboration and open dialogue.
- Identifying knowledge gaps and continually gathering information — on substances and their effects — is vital, but a lack of information is not an excuse for inaction. To ensure the protection of workers, a precautionary approach must be taken.

- At ECHA, as a response to the recent reviews of the REACH legislation, chemicals will be grouped with similar chemicals whose effects are known to facilitate a better knowledge base and fill information gaps on the toxic effects of substances. ECHA will also put efforts in improving the knowledge transfer in the supply chain and put at the disposition of workplace actors simple, targeted information to support workplace risk assessment
- Everyone — workers, employers, industry, social partners and policy-makers — must take responsibility and play a role in minimising the use of dangerous substances, in ensuring that legislation is understood and implemented, in the risks are assessed and effective prevention strategies that can feasibly be developed and put into practice.

Ultimately, raising awareness of dangerous substances and how to manage them is key, as is engaging all stakeholders and providing support, guidance materials and tools. As summed up by Zinta Podniece, ‘EU-, country- and workplace-level collaboration is essential’ for protecting workers: the future ‘is in all our hands’.

Closing session and outlook

In her closing remarks, **Dr Christa Sedlatschek** reflected on an ‘*insightful, inspiring and uplifting 2 days*’ with many highlights, particularly the Healthy Workplaces Good Practice Awards Ceremony, which demonstrated ‘*how dangerous substances can be managed in innovative ways*’, and the ‘*thought-provoking and engaging*’ parallel sessions.

She also urged everyone to get behind the Agency’s next campaign — Healthy Workplaces Lighten the Load. This campaign — which will be launched in October 2020 — will focus on musculoskeletal disorders (MSDs), the most common work-related health problem in Europe, and aims to convey seven key messages:

1. MSDs affect all jobs in all sectors but can be prevented and managed.
2. Tackling MSDs can improve worker well-being and benefit business productivity.
3. Easy and practical measures can be adopted to prevent MSDs.
4. Early intervention and rehabilitation are possible, needed and desired.
5. Staying physically active — even during periods of musculoskeletal pain — is important.

6. MSDs can be influenced by psychosocial risks, so MSDs and psychosocial risks should be tackled together.
7. Good musculoskeletal health among the future generation of workers and an ever more diverse workforce is vital.

As the summit drew to an end, **Charlotte Grevfors Ernoult**, Head of Unit of the Health and Safety at Work unit at the Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, took the opportunity to offer a final congratulations to the Agency and all its partners on this ‘*inspiring and informative*’ campaign summit, which provided an invaluable ‘*opportunity to share and discuss good practice*’ and highlighted the effectiveness of the Agency’s tripartite structure. She emphasised the urgent need to tackle carcinogens and other dangerous substances and reiterated the messages expressed by many during the summit:

‘to make a real difference, legislative and non-legislative measures must go hand in hand’ and only the ‘commitment of all players can ensure the protection of workers’.



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