

# **'Towards a sustainable working life' Forum on new and emerging OSH risks Brussels, 29-30 October 2009**

## **Opening speech**

Welcome one and all to this forum on emerging risks in occupational safety and health, organised by the European research Area network on New OSH.

I am very pleased to be opening this day on behalf of the Federal Public Service for Employment, Labour and Social Dialogue, which is hosting this event.

Our FPS is one of the partners of the New OSH ERA network, which aims to improve coordination at the European level between research programmes into the risks related to health and safety at the workplace.

Research and developments in this field are very close to our hearts. In Belgium, the wellbeing of workers (i.e. their health and their safety) is subject to precise regulations covering several fields. Wellbeing is sought after using measures related to safety, the protection of health, the psycho-social load resulting from work (notably from violence and psychological or sexual harassment), ergonomics, work hygiene and so on. Every day, efforts are made to make businesses aware of the risks and of their obligations, to help them apply these regulations in practice, and to check on how they are applied.

The wellbeing of workers is strongly influenced by changes in working conditions and the organisation of work. The new risks are still not widely known. There is more and more talk of ergonomic and psycho-social risks in the work environment, or of specific risks such as those presented by nanotechnology. But there is a lot of research that still needs to be done to better understand these phenomena, to identify the work-related causes, and to find effective methods to prevent them. In addition, chemical and physical factors are all too quickly considered to be sufficiently understood.

In Belgium, we have developed a national strategy on wellbeing at work (2008-2012) in conjunction with the European Union strategy aimed at reducing the incidence rate of occupational accidents in Europe by 25%. The Belgian strategy uses its main objective: to achieve a continuous, sustainable and uniform reduction in the number of accidents at work and of occupational illnesses.

Our goals are as follows:

1. To reduce accidents at work by 25% over a five-year period.
2. To encourage changes in behaviour among workers by promoting a culture of risk prevention.
3. To improve the functioning of prevention services, notably information exchange, and to reinforce control procedures.

The life and health of workers and their wellbeing at work create added value for society as a whole and for individual enterprises in particular. Good health at work improves public health in general as well as the productivity and competitiveness of enterprises.

In an increasingly globalised world, subject to requirements of productivity and immediacy, the impermanent and fluctuating conditions in the labour market also have an impact on wellbeing at work. We cannot focus solely on work and working conditions in the strictest sense. We must also address the transitions that occur, and therefore also the new risks.

More attention must also be paid to the 'new' risk groups, in cases such as subcontracting, secondment, migrants, older workers, disabled workers and temporary work, and to the wellbeing of freelance workers.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Extract from the Belgian "Stratégie nationale"

It is therefore in our interest to anticipate as much as possible changes to the labour market and to the level of working conditions so as to prevent risks and improve working situations.

Scientific research is helping us in all fields related to wellbeing at work, particularly in improving regulations and raising awareness among actors in the field who are working to prevent risks within enterprises. We are endeavouring to make our FPS an interface between the world of research and the world of work, and to focus research programmes on themes that are of concern for the health and safety of workers. Most of the research we sponsor results in practical tools that can be used immediately by enterprises and which are circulated in the field.

By way of example I would cite several research projects currently underway that aim to:

- reinforce prevention of accidents at work, primarily by detecting the psycho-social risk factors linked to these accidents;
- carry out a national survey into the state of health and safety as experienced by workers (in cooperation with the European Foundation in Dublin);
- assess the phenomenon of burnout at work in Belgium as a first stage, followed by the development of prevention tools;
- evaluate the regulations and the way they are applied in the world of work;
- raise awareness among general practitioners about the issue of professional illnesses;
- address new risks and monitor the research undertaken by universities into new risks associated with nanotechnology: how do these nanoparticles penetrate the human body? What effects do they have on organs and cells? How are these measured? What prevention measures should be taken?

It is important that this is also done on the European level; i.e. using useful results and focussing new research programmes on the concerns of people in the sector. To this end we must maintain contact with prevention counsellors and social partners to identify needs.

There is much to be gained from exchanges between the scientific community, political decision-makers, social partners and public institutions. This will help us to mutually reinforce our joint efforts to improve wellbeing at work.

Days like today, and productive dialogues within the New OSH ERA network are therefore essential.

I wish you all an excellent day.

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Vice-Prime Minister  
Minister for Employment and Equality, in charge of Migration  
and Asylum policy