Covid-19:
How do OSH professionals impact public-policy?

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

Richard Jones, MSc CFIOSH PIEMA FRSPH MCIPR

IOSH Head of Policy
and Regulatory Engagement
Institution of Occupational Safety and Health

The Grange, Highfield Drive, Wigston,
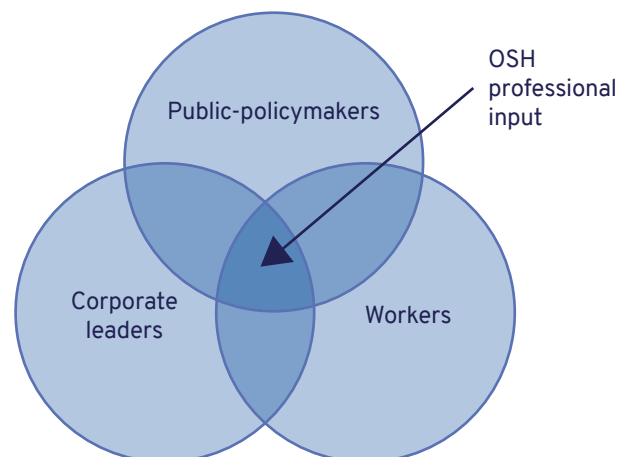Leicestershire LE18 1NN UK

E-mail: Richard.Jones@iosh.com

OSH professionals and workplaces during COVID-19

From the devastating 'Spanish Flu' (H1N1) a century ago, to other pandemic influenzas, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and most recently COVID-19, outbreaks of major respiratory viruses and other communicable diseases strike fear and dread into populations.

They remind us of our fragility and mortality, but also of our tenacity and resilience. This article explores the role of OSH professionals in helping prevent the spread of communicable diseases worldwide.

During times of major challenge and crisis such as COVID-19, occupational safety and health (OSH) professionals have crucial roles in helping corporate leaders, workers and governments to protect lives and manage OSH and wellbeing risks, business continuity and sustainability. They operate throughout all sectors, at all levels and with organisations of all sizes and types across the globe, and professional bodies, such as IOSH, actively support their vital work (see www.iosh.com/coronavirus).[1]

The Coronavirus pandemic and large-scale loss of life and human suffering is a public health crisis that tests the world's collective capacity to respond,[2,3] Protecting people is the top priority for public-policy and decision-makers. As part of this, responsible workplaces act to safeguard workers' physical and mental health, prevent exposure to COVID-19, monitor the disease and its spread, seek access to the best treatment for any workers who become ill and provide wellbeing support for those who are quarantined.

Whatever the workplace issue – whether it is dealing with growth or slow-down in demand; reduced workforce due to absences; changes of personnel, roles, products or services; more working from home; logistics and supply problems; the need for increased hygiene, social distancing, personal protective equipment and mental health support – or a myriad of other requirements, including the post-pandemic safe resumption of work, OSH professionals can help.

Workplaces everywhere are focal points for guidance on preventing viral-exposure and containing infectious diseases at work, sharing authoritative information and webinars on pandemic-related OSH and wellbeing. OSH professionals, taking a multidisciplinary approach, advise on how to prevent COVID-19 spread, protect lives, identify solutions, safely redesign activities and ensure OSH for workers, supply chains, volunteers, new entrants and 'unretirees' re-joining the workforce. They also help maintain ongoing protection for workforces and the

public from other serious harms and develop plans for safely resuming operations post-pandemic.

Many parts of the world have used some level of COVID-19 lockdown, with the World Economic Forum estimating almost 3 billion people affected,[4] and some organisations have closed completely. As these restrictions are gradually eased in the coming months, OSH professionals will work closely with employers on plans for safe and efficient return to normal work, whatever that might be. People will need refreshers on safe working procedures and

services and equipment will need to be re-commissioned for safe operation. Lockdowns have also led to 'forced-transformation' in certain corporate functions and it may be that some of these changes are retained and their associated risks managed. OSH professionals are at the forefront of all this work. In these new scenarios, putting the 'health' back into health and safety is more important than ever for protecting workforces and enhancing productivity and engagement.
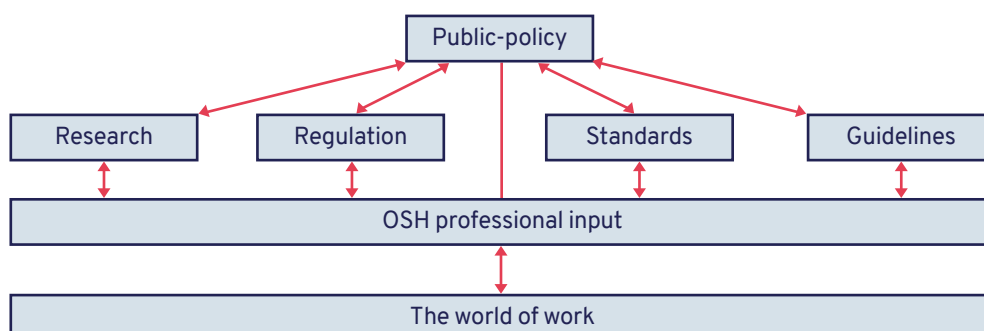
▶ Public-policy on OSH during COVID-19

Proactive governments work with organisations and have, as their central aim, the safeguarding of all workers, including those most at-risk from COVID-19 due to health-status and age or their viral-exposure. They seek to provide health and social care workers and others on the frontline with safe systems of work, including adequate staffing-levels, training and personal protective equipment, together with appropriate health tests, mental health support and return-to-work processes. While supportive organisations prioritise work that assists societal efforts to fight the COVID-19 pandemic, safely postponing non-essential activity as necessary (see www.iosh.com/coronavirus/position).[5]

More generally, in many countries, public-policy encourages compliance with infection prevention measures and quarantining. This means providing access to reliable and clear advice, employment protection and income-support for all affected workers, including self-employed, gig, zero-hours and migrant workers and also protecting the many community volunteers. Additionally, it involves national emergency plans that allow for an increase in healthcare facilities to meet the growth in demand and it prepares for months of national and international disruption. While global coordination, led by the G20 on equipment, treatment and vaccines, support for lower-income countries, improved emergency preparations, and longer-term recovery plans, are all needed too.

▶ OSH professionals and public-policy during COVID-19

OSH professionals have vitally influential roles within both national and international communities – sharing knowledge and experience about this new virus and helping public-policymakers to design, implement and adapt their responses. As well as contributing to the development and promotion of new guidance from public authorities, ministries, international agencies and regulatory bodies – OSH professionals inform industry and sector guidance and take part in research and intelligence-gathering on COVID-19 management at work.

Examples of this have included the World Health Organization's series of webinars with IOSH and survey on OSH professionals experience of COVID-19; the recent consultation on future challenges by the International Social Security Association; and in the UK, the new waste management industry guidance on COVID-19 from its sector forum, national calls to identify sources of spare medical equipment that can be deployed to places of acute need during the outbreak, and work to promote national and international standards.

Compounding the terrible and tragic human cost of the pandemic, its socio-economic dimensions are extensive and profound. There is concern that unemployment, under-employment, lack of social support and poverty may lead workers in the informal economy to feel pressured to undertake dangerous work and to risk exposing themselves and others to COVID-19. It is vital to ensure that workers who have close contact with members of the public are adequately protected and prevented from both contracting and transmitting disease. OSH professionals can advise organisations and public procurers about their responsibilities to exercise due diligence and provide support for suppliers and informal workers within their supply chains.

▶ Conclusions

This year's World Day for Safety and Health at Work very sadly includes commemorating the health and social care workers who cared for COVID-19 patients and themselves died from COVID-19. Safeguarding the safety and health of those workers most at-risk means that no worker should ever die as a result of occupational exposure to coronavirus or other forms of communicable disease. The OSH lessons must be learned and must inform global strategies for future prevention. These are multifaceted and range from ensuring adequate planning, resourcing, personal protective equipment and awareness-raising, to providing social security and wellbeing services and regulatory intervention where necessary. And from better use of technology, testing and tracing, to assigning necessary support to all the frontline staff providing essential services.

As a strong, vibrant, global community, OSH professionals are building collaboration and seeking to actively engage in OSH public-policy worldwide, helping countries and communities to support health and prevent and tackle communicable diseases. This tragedy has clearly underscored the key role of OSH in public health and the vital importance of building a strong multidisciplinary, human-centred approach to public-policy, in order to save lives and livelihoods.[6]

▶ Calls for action

Given the scale and ongoing nature of the worldwide communicable-disease challenge and need for sustained focus on shared solutions, from an OSH perspective important calls for action include:

▶ Global coordination to ensure all workforces, particularly frontline workers and the vulnerable, are adequately protected from communicable diseases at work

▶ Enhanced OSH professional collaboration and multidisciplinary working to share lessons on disease prevention, containment, risk management and safe resumption of work

▶ Action to ensure higher levels of pandemic alertness and swifter triggering of global, national and corporate emergency plans

▶ Opportunities for regular and systematic OSH professional input to development, implementation and review of public-policy on pandemics

▶ Support for OSH, occupational health and related professionals in emerging and developing economies that have yet to build sufficient OSH competence and capacity

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