

50 Years of Protecting Worker Respiratory Health

May 31, 2017 by David Weissman, MD, and Doug Johns, PhD

2017 is an important year for the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health's (NIOSH) Respiratory Health Division (RHD). This is the 50th anniversary of our establishment in 1967 as the Appalachian Laboratory for Occupational Respiratory Disease (ALFORD) within the U.S. Public Health Service. ALFORD subsequently joined NIOSH in 1971, changed into the Division of Respiratory Disease Studies (DRDS) in 1977, and then became the Respiratory Health Division (RHD) in 2015. But one thing is unchanged – the importance of our efforts to prevent work-related respiratory disease and improve workers' respiratory health.

ALFORD's mission was to address occupational issues affecting Appalachia. Its first priority was to prevent occupational respiratory disease in coal miners. The Federal Coal Mine Health and Safety Act of 1969 assigned official responsibilities in this area to ALFORD. These included operating a national health screening program for coal miners and conducting a national study to evaluate respiratory disease in coal miners. Subsequently, responsibilities assigned from the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970 expanded the group's mission to advance prevention of work-related respiratory disease across the spectrum of occupations and industries. Over the years, efforts to identify and address work-related respiratory hazards have had great impact. They have provided a scientific foundation for prevention recommendations and have helped to target prevention efforts where they could do the most good. While our work has had a measurable impact in protecting workers from work-related respiratory hazards, these efforts continue to be greatly needed. Respiratory disease is still a leading cause of illness and death, and work exposures, including new and emerging ones, are significant contributors.

RHD has accomplished much working in partnership with industry, labor, academia and federal, state, and local government agencies on a range of efforts. Examples include:

- assisting workplaces through the [Health Hazard Evaluation Program](#);
- providing [health surveillance to coal miners](#);
- tracking the burden of work-related respiratory disease through a program of national [surveillance](#) and partnerships with states;
- conducting innovative research addressing many respiratory hazards including [coal mine dust](#), [silica](#), [nylon flock](#), [flavoring chemicals](#), [indium](#), [beryllium](#), [indoor environmental quality](#) and others;
- assuring that the nation has access to tools for identifying occupational respiratory disease, including classification of [chest radiographs](#) and high quality [spirometry](#); and
- communicating results and providing recommendations through various types of NIOSH publications, [science blogs](#), [HHEs](#), and social media outlets such as Twitter (@NIOSHbreathe) and Facebook (@CWHSP).

In reflecting on past accomplishments and planning for the future, RHD is co-sponsoring an occupational respiratory symposium on August 10, 2017 with West Virginia University (WVU), a long-time partner celebrating its own 25th anniversary of WVU's Occupational Medicine Training Program. The symposium will be held in WVU's Health Sciences Center and will bring together a multidisciplinary group of occupational health scientists to discuss national and state-specific issues related to occupational health, with a special focus on preventing occupational respiratory disease. The symposium will also provide a venue for junior scientists, including WVU students, to present their research, gain perspective on the history and importance of occupational health research, and become engaged in planning the future of the field. Further information on the symposium will be posted on our new [Respiratory Health at Work](#) directory webpage, which also provides up-to-date information and links to the various programs within RHD and across NIOSH related to the prevention of work-related respiratory disease. You can also follow us on Twitter at @NIOSHbreathe. Hope to see you there!

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2 comments on “50 Years of Protecting Worker Respiratory Health”

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My warmest congratulations for the 50th anniversary of DRDS long, innovative and continuous efforts regarding research, education and prevention of occupational respiratory diseases!

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I'm so happy that this organization has been around to continually help those workers who are placed in environments that could be toxic. My grandfather was a coal miner in West Virginia and worked the coal mines in the 20s, 30s and 40s. Conditions were brutal but these brave souls continued anyway.

Whether coal mining or other potentially toxic work environments, studying the air quality, monitoring and measuring, and providing feedback and improvement is critical. No one should be subjected to breathing dangerous or toxic air for long periods of time. With today's technology there are plenty of ways to measure air quality and provide solutions.

Thanks again for posting this.

Skip Sanzeri

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