

The Joint Science Symposia on Occupational Safety & Health – An Introduction

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The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health of the US and the Finnish Institute of Occupational Health have, since 1980, periodically convened joint scientific symposia and the Swedish National Institute for Working Life has twice joined them as a co-sponsor. These symposia have enabled the research staff of these Institutes to share results of recent studies in the fields of occupational safety and health, to identify mutual research interests through discussions of current research objectives and needs, and to plan new collaborations or extensions of previously fruitful collaborations. Although each of the symposia has focused only on a subset of workplace hazards and the disciplines integral to the study of these hazards, the themes included have over the years spanned the full breadth of the field. Contributions to these symposia have been published as proceedings so that these complementary research reports are accessible to other researchers in the fields of occupational safety and health.

In October 1998, researchers from the three Institutes met for the 7th Joint Science Symposium. In addition to the presented papers, there were frequent and varied small group discussions. Such exchanges at past symposia have led to significant and productive collaborations such as the study of Siberian asbestos miners, a summary of which is included in this issue of the *American Journal of Industrial Medicine*. Future collaborations in areas such as workplace violence and the myriad issues relevant to the aging workforce will be built on the interactions at this symposium.

The research studies presented at this symposium centered around six themes. A session on *Work Life in Transition* focused on the occupational safety and health implications of changes in both the workforce (e.g., increased diversity) and the workplace (e.g., new technologies and employment practices.) Complementing that session was another, *Special Populations at Risk*, which addressed the workplace concerns and outcomes which may

be uniquely characteristic of subsets of the workforce such as aging workers and minorities. Contributions to *Work Environment Management/Systems* focused on recent developments in control technologies, practices and systems for managing hazards, and workplace promotion of health and health services. New approaches, such as optimizing work systems in the design phase for health and safety as well as for productivity, and innovative tools for intervention efforts were targeted in the session *Prevention Strategies*. *New Occupational Allergies and Asthma* included not only the presentation of updated surveillance data but also laboratory studies addressing specific allergens or irritants and sensitizers associated with asthma. Last, the session *Mixed Exposures*, focused on exposure assessment methodologies as well as the characterization of work environments and ensuing health effects from exposures to mixtures such as asphalt fumes or environmental tobacco smoke.

This issue of the *AJIM* includes some of the papers presented during the 7th Joint Symposium. It is our hope that sharing these research reports with the broader community of scientists concerned with occupational safety and health issues will provide a basis for extended networks of communication and the building blocks essential for increased collaborations addressing workplace risks.

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