

Engaging Interdisciplinary Professionals for Worker Health Equity

Janelle Z. Martelino, RN, MN, FACMPE¹ , Eunice D. Soh, PhD, MSN, MPH, FNP-C², and Jenny Hsin-Chun Tsai, PhD, RN, PMHCNS-BC¹

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Worker health and safety is layered and complex. The burden of work-related illnesses and injuries disproportionately impacts systemically disenfranchised workers. Social determinants of equity, such as racism, sexism, and classism (Wipfli et al., 2021), influence available work opportunities, employment quality, and working conditions based on an individual's identities (e.g., race, gender, class). The multifaceted nature of worker health and safety necessitates a systems-thinking approach that demands interdisciplinary engagement from professionals both within and outside occupational health and safety (OHS; Felknor et al., 2020) to advance worker health equity effectively. Bound by the American Association of Occupational Health Nurses Code of Ethics to promote collaboration with other professionals, occupational health nurses (OHNs) are well-positioned to lead worker health equity engagement among interdisciplinary colleagues. While interdisciplinary engagement within OHS is ongoing, there are opportunities for OHNs to increase awareness and collaboration among non-OHS professionals in advancing worker health equity.

Identify Key Non-OHS Perspectives

What non-OHS points of view are needed? Consider the variety of non-OHS roles and the people in these roles who are included and not often included in these discussions. When non-OHS colleagues are identified, ask what other essential perspectives should be included. Key stakeholder analysis (Franco-Trigo et al., 2020) can be valuable.

Communicate With “Why”

The OHNs must be able to intentionally communicate the importance and relevance of OHS principles, practices, and worker health issues to non-OHS colleagues. Emphasizing the big “why” worker health should concern everyone in the organization, adapting the messaging for different units, worker roles, and managerial levels. For

example, when promoting work and health concepts to engineers, messaging can be tailored to illustrate that human factors play a key role in designing user experience and in interfacing with occupational tasks, such as the design of power tools for construction workers. For occupational and physical therapists typically concerned with rehabilitation after injury, messaging can focus on their discipline's ability to provide consultation on optimizing movement for workers to change workplace procedures or design to prevent injuries. In addition, this message should speak to the organization's health and safety culture and outline the consequences for not addressing the issue. A 30-second elevator speech about why greater attention must be paid to worker health by everyone (e.g., “Our employees deserve to come to their workplace without the threat of illness or injury.”) is a useful tool for succinctly communicating the “why” throughout the organization.

Invite Collaboration From Key Non-OHS Colleagues

Non-OHS collaborators are critical to understanding the facilitators, barriers, and opportunities in worker health equity initiatives. Convening an interdisciplinary workgroup assembles diverse expertise and establishes an ongoing collaboration to address cross-cutting issues. Be clear about the ask from these partners (e.g., level of involvement and responsibilities). Value their perspectives and actively involve them in framing questions and objectives, mapping key partners, designing worker health equity improvement approaches, and evaluation. Consider what organizational changes can be proposed and what unintended consequences may occur. Apply a range of engagement and facilitation techniques to provide options for individuals to participate based on their availability, needs, and preferences. See the Engagement Streams Framework (<https://organizingengagement.org/models/engagement-streams-framework/>) for strategy examples.

Significant changes in the nature of work, workers, and workplace environment affect worker health, particularly among systemically disenfranchised workers. A more expansive, systems-thinking approach to solving worker health inequity requires interdisciplinary collaboration, and OHNs are well-suited to spearhead such engagement. OHNs must engage diverse, non-OHS professionals and disciplines in OHS practice to promote more significant innovation in

preventing and problem-solving the worker health equity challenges of our time.

Authors' Note

J.Z.M., E.D.S., and J.H.-C.T. all contributed to the conception, drafting, revision, and approval of the submitted work.

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ORCID iD

Janelle Z. Martelino  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1133-7608>

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DOI: 10.1177/21650799231217305. From ¹Department of Child, Family, and Population Health Nursing, School of Nursing, University of Washington, ²Seattle Children's Hospital and Regional Medical Center. Address correspondence to: Janelle Z. Martelino, RN, MN, FACMPE, Department of Child, Family, and Population Health Nursing, School of Nursing, University of Washington, Box 357263, Seattle, WA 98195-7263, USA; email: jzamora@uw.edu.

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