

## Editorial

# The Power of a Photograph to Capture Many Truths in Occupational Health

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The truth of the saying that “a picture says a thousand words” has become evident again with the circumstances related to the cover photograph on the May 2018 *Annals of Work Exposures and Health* (AWEH) special issue on gender, work, and health. Sometimes the same photograph can evoke profound, yet different meanings. The cover photo was taken by renowned labor and occupational health photographer, Mr Earl Dotter, who has chronicled the lives of workers in the USA for more than 50 years (Dotter, 2018). The AWEH May 2018 issue was developed to evaluate what we know currently about gender roles and their impact on workers. The cover photo was selected to illustrate a woman and a man, performing physically demanding work, side-by-side, in an equal manner. It was taken in a dairy barn and the strength and intense focus of the farmers was compelling. Following publication, we received feedback that the photo, which pictured the work of milking cows, evoked some understandably strong reactions; it triggered for some, associations with disrespect toward women, because women have been referred to negatively as ‘cows’. The association was particularly strong because this was the first AWEH issue on gender. It is important to pay attention to what photos evoke for us; in fact, we hope that the AWEH May 2018 issue will be a starting point for a constructive dialogue on the serious, long-term consequences of gender differences and inequalities on worker health, including in our own field.

Tragically, on 20 September 2018, the cover photo took on an additional meaning. The National Farm Medicine Center (NFMC) in Marshfield Wisconsin USA, notified Mr Dotter that the man in the cover photo, Mr Peter Petersen, experienced a fatal fall while working in the silo on his dairy farm, possibly from the impact of a silage gas release. His wife, Mrs Sally Petersen, also in the cover photo, was working nearby. Our occupational health community can extend particularly deep understanding and empathy to the Petersen family for this terrible loss. While the work of farmers sustains life, our field has documented that globally, agriculture ranks among the most life-threatening industries for the farmers themselves (Hämäläinen et al., 2017). The highest rates of fatal agricultural injuries are in low income countries, however even in high income countries farmers are at substantial risk for fatal and nonfatal injuries; and farming is one of the few industries in which family members, who often share the farm work, are also at risk. In 2016, in the USA, 417 farmers and farm workers died from a work-related injury, resulting in a fatality rate of 21.4 deaths per 100 000 workers (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). During 2017/2018, 29 workers were killed on British farms—up from 27 the year before, resulting in 8.44 fatalities per 100 000 workers, the highest fatal accident rate for all main UK industry sectors—about 18 times as high as the all-industry rate (Health and Safety Executive, 2018).

At the time of Mr Petersen's death, his family had not seen the AWEH May 2018 issue. Mr Dotter sent Mrs Petersen the series of photos he had taken for the NFMC of the Petersons at work together on their Wisconsin dairy farm. The AWEH May 2018 cover photo was framed and presented to Mrs Petersen by the NFMC health communications manager. He wrote to let the AWEH editors know how meaningful it was to Mrs Petersen that the work she shared equitably with her husband was being honored by our occupational health community.

### Declaration

No funding was used to support the production of this editorial. The opinions stated are solely those of the authors.

### References

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