

# The Challenges of Occupational Health Service Centers in Japan

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**Abstract:** The improvement of occupational health conditions in Small- and medium-scale enterprises (SMEs) is the most crucial issue in occupational health in Japan today. Improvement will depend on how occupational health services are provided to SMEs. Recently, Occupational Health Service Centers (OHSCs) providing occupational health services for SMEs have become more firmly established and expectations for further improvement in quality and quantity are high. In this way it is hoped that the challenges of providing “occupational health for all” can be met.

**Key words:** Small-scale enterprises, Occupational health, Occupational Health Service Centers

## Introduction

Small- and medium-scale enterprises (SMEs), which are legal entities with a capital not exceeding ¥ 100 million nor a regular workforce of more than 300, make up 99.7% of companies and employ 72.7% of workers in Japan<sup>1</sup>. In many cases, however, occupational health conditions at the workplace of SMEs are poor<sup>2, 3</sup>. The improvement of occupational health conditions in SMEs is, therefore, the most crucial issue in occupational health in Japan today. In many SMEs, human and facility resources are extremely limited. It is difficult for SMEs to have their own occupational physician etc. for an economic reasons. SMEs often cannot carry out the basic activities in occupational health by themselves<sup>4</sup>. Improvement in occupational health at SMEs will depend on how occupational health services are provided to SMEs.

Recently, occupational health service centers (OHSCs) providing occupational health services for SMEs have become more firmly established and expectations for further improvement are high. This paper will present the situation in occupational health in Japan and the features of OHSCs.

## Current Situation in Occupational Health Services Offered to Japanese Small-scale Enterprises

According to Japanese law, an employer is obligated to: 1. implement regular health check-ups for employees, 2. appoint an occupational physician (for enterprises with over 50 employees), and 3. measure environmental factors in workplaces that handle harmful substances<sup>5</sup>. Most SMEs are supported in these requirements by OHSCs because they are lacking in human and/or medical facility resources.

The health check-up rate in Japan is extremely high (Table 1). The rates vary according to the size of the enterprises (Table 2). Large-scale enterprises often conduct regular health check-ups by their own occupational physician utilizing their own facilities. The percentage of enterprises where regular health check-ups are conducted by health check-up agencies and hospitals increases as their size becomes smaller. Health check-up agencies which can provide only health check-ups and provide neither follow-up based on the results nor measurement of environmental factors in the workplace, are covering more than 40% of those enterprises with less than 300 employees. In many cases, health check-up agencies go directly to the company to conduct health check-ups in order to reduce the amount of time employees spend away from the workplace. In addition to health check-ups, some of these agencies offer

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other occupational health services as well as environmental measurements and some of these also have consulting services equipped to meet the individual occupational health needs of companies.

A previous study revealed that multiple channels for occupational health services for SMEs existed in Japan<sup>6</sup>. The Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare adopted a policy aimed at improving occupational health services for SMEs by establishing 347 regional occupational health centers and 47 occupational health promotion centers in each administrative division in 1993. Regional occupational health centers were founded across the nation. The county, city and ward medical associations, which have signed contracts with the government, are operating these centers. Regional occupational health centers offer the following services: over the counter health counseling, occupational health guidance on separate visits, offer occupational health information. The Japan Labour Health and Welfare Organization established occupational health promotion centers in each administrative division. The roles of occupational health promotion centers are: professional counseling on occupational health, support to regional occupational health centers, collection and dissemination of information on

occupational health, training of occupational health physicians, etc. Nongovernmental organization included The Japanese Medical Association, occupational physicians (general practitioners etc.), OHSCs, health check-up agencies, hospitals, parent companies. An OHSC is defined as an organization delivering occupational health services on a profit basis<sup>7</sup>. Although OHSCs are nongovernmental organizations, most of them are staffed by juridical persons, thus they have a public aspect.

The Japan Federation of Occupational Health Organizations consisting of about 130 OHSCs, conducts the Total Quality Control Activity for health examination service provided by OHSCs.

### The Services provided by Advanced Occupational Health Service Centers

Many SMEs are provided regular health check-ups services from health check-up agencies. In addition to health check-ups, some health check-up agencies offer other occupational health services such as follow-up based on health check-up results .OHSCs provided follow-up based on health check-up results and measurement of environmental factors in workplaces to many SMEs. Some of the OHSCs which dispatch physicians and nursing staff, can offer a very comprehensive range of services including follow-up consultation on services provided and suggestions for improvement. We call such an organization Advanced Occupational Health Service Centers (AOHSCs) (Fig. 1). AOHSCs can provide health check-ups and follow-up based on the results, measurement of environmental factors in the workplace, occupational health nursing services (continuous instruction), occupational physicians service (workplace patrol, attendance at health committee meetings, appropriate personnel assignment, return-to-duty examination, follow-up after check-up, etc.), consulting and provision of suggestions and service to help make improvements to SMEs.

**Table 1. Health check-up rates (classified by size by the number of employees)**

Classification	rates
All Sizes	85.1%
more than 5,000	94.5%
1,000-4,999	95.0%
100-999	92.9%
50-99	88.1%
30-49	87.5%
10-29	72.7%

From: Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (1997)

**Table 2. Institutions providing regular health check-up (classified by size by the number of employees)**

Classification	total	Occupational physician at a workplace	Health check-up agency etc.	Public hospitals	Private hospitals	Others
All Sizes	100.0%	14.9%	36.2%	6.3%	21.0%	21.7%
more than 5,000	100.0%	89.5%	7.1%	—	1.7%	1.7%
1,000-4,999	100.0%	71.3%	20.2%	0.2%	4.1%	4.1%
300-999	100.0%	46.0%	39.6%	1.9%	5.1%	7.4%
100-299	100.0%	36.0%	43.7%	1.3%	9.7%	9.2%
50-99	100.0%	24.6%	46.9%	2.9%	13.9%	11.9%
30-49	100.0%	11.7%	46.6%	5.5%	19.3%	16.8%
10-29	100.0%	11.9%	31.7%	7.4%	23.6%	25.4%

From: Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, Survey on state of employee's health (1997)

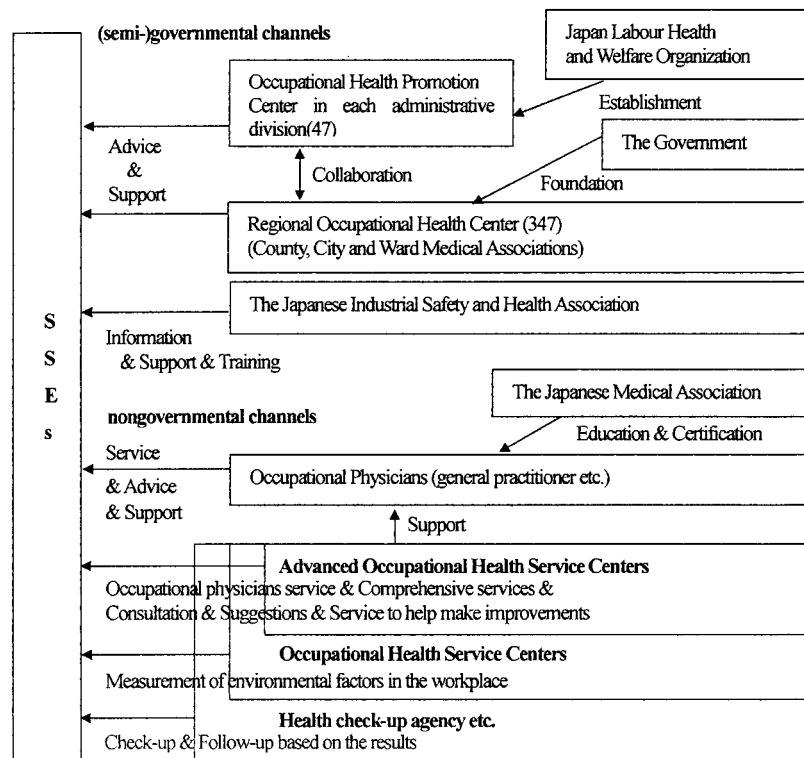


Fig. 1. Multiple channels in providing for Occupational Health Services to small-scale Enterprises (SSEs).

## The Advantages of Advanced Occupational Health Service Centers

The advantages of AOHSCs are expertise and independence in occupational health activities, comprehensive services, social resources and their ability to secure a place for specialists to work which leads to practical service in response to occupational health demands. These centers enable a service offer to SMEs on a commercial basis<sup>8)</sup>. When these activities are developed broadly in future, it is extremely important to base them on sound economic principles. In addition, it is very important as social resources that OHSCs can offer parts of general services that meet such a demand if necessary. OHSCs can help general practitioners (most of the part-time occupational physicians) and consultants in providing occupational health services.

## The Challenges of Occupational Health Service Centers

At present in Japan, overwork and mental health problems are issues of great concern in occupational health, and thus effective counter-measures are required at SMEs. SMEs have begun to request health check-up agencies and OHSCs to provide them with a greater range of professional services.

Health check-up agencies have developed a relationship based on trust with SMEs through their check-up services. And they have been trying to improve the quality of their services by further responding to such SMEs' needs. Health check-up agencies are positive about delivering professional services to SMEs, in order to distinguish themselves from competitors in the market. These positive changes (trends) have been appreciated by SMEs and have further stimulated their demands for further professional services.

Now, health check-up agencies are evolving into OHSCs, while at the same time OHSCs are evolving into AOHSCs. These changes are improving occupational health services of SMEs in quality and quantity. Both types of OHSCs are continuing to expand the target of their services by, for example, further including SMEs within their industrial areas.

In this way it is hoped that the challenges of providing "occupational health for all" can be met.

## Conclusion

Through the improvement of services, OHSCs are expected to contribute significantly to improved occupational health in SMEs.

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