

Editorial Message

Promotion of Occupational Health and Safety Research: Foundation of a New Independent Administrative Institution in Japan

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As of April 1st, 2006, the National Institute of Industrial Health (NIIH) and the National Institute of Industrial Safety (NIIS) were amalgamated into a single, comprehensive research facility legislated as the Japan National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (JNIOOSH), a new independent administrative government institution.

From its inception as the Silicosis Laboratory, an attached office of the Industrial Health Division, Japan Ministry of Labour, in 1949, the NIIH has since played a leading role in industrial health research, both domestically and internationally. Similarly, the NIIS, which was first established as the Research Institute of Industrial Safety by the Ministry of Welfare in 1942, has pursued a wide variety of research topics in the field of industrial safety as a governmental institution within the Ministry of Labour throughout the latter half of last century, since 1947.

In 1963, our journal: INDUSTRIAL HEALTH, began publishing peer-reviewed original research papers in the field of industrial hygiene and occupational health. This quarterly journal was open to all international contributors, and by the year 2000 had published a total of 992 papers, of which 755 were original articles, 220 short communications, and 17 in-depth review articles¹⁾. During its history, INDUSTRIAL HEALTH was instrumental in the development of advanced occupational health knowledge from a global perspective, especially in Asia.

Another significant activity to promote occupational health research in Japan has been made by the National Conference on Promotion of Occupational Health Research Priorities. This national conference was organized by the NIIH in 2001 and has been supported exclusively by the Japan Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare. The activity of the conference is based on the National Occupational Health Research Agenda (NOHRA), with three key research areas, 18 research priorities and eight implementation measures, proposed in

the previous national conference: Conference on Occupational Health Research Strategies in the 21st Century organized by the Japan Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare from 1998 through to 2001 (Fig. 1, Tables 1, 2)²⁻⁴⁾.

So far, through a four-year extensive review of literature and a questionnaire survey to all members of three major academic societies on occupational health in Japan, the Conference on Promotion of Occupational Health Research Priorities revealed that the following four research priorities were most intensively investigated in terms of both the number of original papers published in the past five years and the number of research workers directly involved (Table 1, Fig. 2)⁴⁾: Work stress and mental health, Quality of working life and health promotion, Toxicity assessment of chemicals, and Risk assessment and health effect index (Research priorities 3, 17, 7 & 12, respectively). In contrast, two research priorities, i.e.

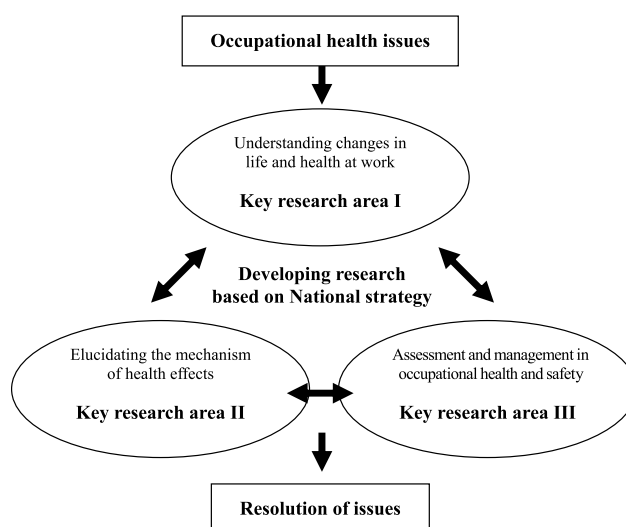


Fig. 1. National occupational health promotion strategies, Japan, 2001^{2, 3)}.

Table 1. National occupational health research agenda of Japan and publication of original papers by Japanese research workers, 1998–2002⁴⁾

Research Areas and Priorities	Year					Total
	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	
Key research area I:						
1. Work style and health	10	11	8	16	16	61
2. Information Technology (IT)	1	3	6	6	4	20
3. Work stress and mental health	11	14	25	38	69	157
4. Work-related disease	5	11	5	16	13	50
5. Elderly workers	1	2	3	7	3	16
6. Women workers	0	6	4	15	17	42
Key research area II:						
7. Toxicity assessment of chemicals	21	27	19	29	34	130
8. Gene effects and carcinogenicity	2	3	2	2	1	10
9. Multiple exposure to environmental factors	2	3	2	0	0	7
10. Individual differences in health effects	1	1	1	1	0	4
11. Ergonomic factors and workload	9	12	14	14	24	73
Key research area III:						
12. Risk assessment and health effect index	17	32	23	7	16	95
13. Risk communication	1	1	4	4	13	23
14. Measurement and control of the work environment	6	8	8	10	15	47
15. Business administration and health and safety management systems	1	3	1	4	5	14
16. Occupational health in small industry and self-employed workers	10	6	9	7	7	39
17. Quality of working life and health promotion	21	29	20	31	56	157
18. International standards and collaboration	1	0	0	0	1	2
Total number of original papers*	101	128	116	155	221	721

*Each paper is classified into one or more research priorities.

Table 2. National occupational health promotion strategies, Japan: Implementation measures^{2, 3)}

1. Promoting the public's awareness of occupational health research
2. Dissemination of research strategies to institutions, specialists and stakeholders
3. Strengthening the function of research institutions and increasing cooperative efforts among both foreign and domestic institutions and researchers
4. Development and use of human resources
5. Securing research funding and ensuring the efficient use of this resource
6. Enhancement of information technology (IT) in research institutions and the opening of research facilities to external researchers
7. Monitoring of the national research strategy and the national research priorities
8. Promotion of the national research strategy with the National Institute of Industrial Health designated as an executive office

International standards and collaboration, and Multiple exposure to environmental factors (ditto 18 & 9, respectively), were found to be the least investigated in terms of the research populations and publication output.

Finally, I believe that: [1] considerable progress should be achieved by further research for two research priorities, i.e. Elderly workers and Women workers (ditto 5 & 6), as these priorities have not been fully investigated (Table 1, Fig. 2) despite the fact that their research priority was identified as the second and third highest priority research topics for the next 10 years (3); [2] greater efforts should be devoted to the least-studied priorities i.e., International standards and collaboration and Multiple

exposure to environmental factors; [3] continued attention needs to be paid to identifying new research priorities such as mesothelioma due to asbestos exposure, and to monitoring the number of researchers and published original papers; and [4] research workers who were registered for each research priority are to be fully utilized as human resources for the promotion of priority research.

With the integration of our two main research institutes, it is expected that the new institute will herald a new era of multidisciplinary occupational health and safety research in the 21st century.

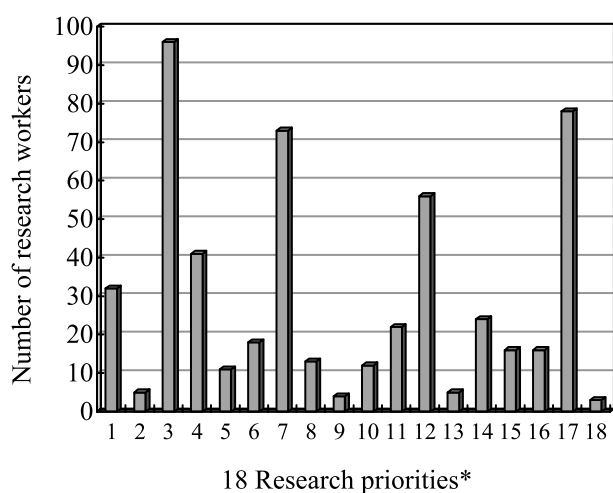


Fig. 2. Number of Japanese research workers for 18 research priorities, registered at the National Conference on Promotion of Occupational Health Research Priorities⁴.

*For numbers of the 18 research priorities, refer to Table 1.

References

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