

COVID-19 pandemic reinforces need to protect workers from exposure to biological agents

Workplace exposure to biological agents is widespread and linked to a large number of health problems, including infectious diseases, allergies and cancer. An estimated 5,000 workers die each year in the EU alone as a result of work-related infectious diseases. EU-OSHA's new report aims to raise awareness of the topic and provide reliable information that supports efforts to establish effective preventive measures.

The research sought to identify and describe the most relevant exposures, and the report provides in-depth analyses for five sectors/types of occupation that are particularly at risk of exposure:

- health care
- animal-related occupations
- waste and wastewater treatment
- arable farming
- occupations that involve travelling or contact with travellers.

The project also focused on emerging risks, including multi-resistant bacteria and the wider spread of infectious agents. The occurrence of the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and COVID-19 epidemics in Europe, for example, have been linked to the phenomenon of globalisation. EU-OSHA's Executive Director, Christa Sedlatschek, emphasises the effect that such pandemics have on the healthcare sector: *'Global health problems are putting healthcare systems under intense pressure, and urgent measures are needed to protect workers from infectious diseases beyond the provision of protective equipment. Healthcare workers' safety and health has to be a priority in an emergency situation such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which has shown how important it is that the existing legal protections are implemented.'*

The experts interviewed for the project spoke of the need for emergency plans that allocate financial resources to tackling future outbreaks of disease. They also mentioned that information collected through compulsory reporting could help in identifying early signs of the spread of a disease.

A legal framework exists to protect people from workplace exposure to harmful biological agents, but awareness of it needs to be raised. If the risks are to be tackled in a better organised way, exposure to biological agents and the health problems resulting from them have to be assessed and recorded. With this in mind, the research looked at and analysed systems for monitoring diseases and exposures. Providing more training and guidance to employers and workers will also help to ensure more systematic prevention.

The research highlights that there is lack of awareness of exposure to biological agents in all sectors with the exception of healthcare and

laboratories. In addition, groups such as young people, cleaners and maintenance workers, migrant workers and pregnant women are at particular risk. Improving access to information and implementing specific measures to protect such groups are therefore essential.

Case study examples demonstrate the importance of recognising the risks and taking collective action to manage them. For example, in Finland, the occupational health services have made effective use of health surveillance data for targeted interventions to tackle farmer's lung. The measures introduced were successful in reducing the number of cases and in helping agricultural workers who had already experienced health problems.

The report also concludes that sectors affected by unintended exposures need general guidance and that providing workers with relevant information is key. Respecting the hierarchy of control measures set out in legislation and prioritising collective over personal protective measures are vital.

Links: