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The 83rd Italian Congress on Occupational Health was held in Parma from 15th to 17th September 2021

Traditional welcome greetings never had such an appropriate meaning as on this occasion. We have lived through a terrible period dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic and, for the first time in the long history of our Society, after dozens of annual editions, in 2020 our national Congress was cancelled. In addition to the obvious aspects of professional updating, our annual appointment plays an essential aggregative and social role in a broad sense. Furthermore, during the National Congress, the public presentation of documents and subsequent debate of our programmatic guidelines partly guides the Presidency and the Board in activities for the following year. Due to restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, we were unable to accept a high number of registration requests, which, however, testify that a significant value in society dynamics is also attributed to the Congress by our Members. The desire to resume attendance and meeting colleagues, and the great interest in this congress event are also due to its contents. As said before, for many months, our social system was suspended. Schools and universities were closed as all social and cultural aggregation and production activities – mainly small and medium enterprises – were reduced or converted. Many professionals had to radically change their life and work habits, and some experienced real prolonged inactivity. And what about occupational physicians? Indeed, their activity was very different as compared to the period before the pandemic, but it was very intense and qualified for all the tasks and burdens they were called upon to perform, in all phases and in all the waves that followed one another from winter 2020 to today. Sometimes, the tasks set by the Government to occupational physicians appeared beyond the norm. Sometimes, they were contradictory, and sometimes they were unclear in a con-

tinuously changing scenario. In this context, SIML has committed itself to create an ongoing dialogue with the institutions (also strongly affirming its position, when necessary) and to produce documents aimed at guiding colleagues engaged on the front line. Such an intense activity also resulted in scientific documents on tracing activities and swabs collection to limit outbreaks, the organization of campaigns to study the prevalence of specific antibodies in working populations (especially among health care workers), and the organization of vaccination services.

Registered participants (No.=630) to the Congress saturated the maximum allowed capacity of the structure under restrictions dictated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and one third were postgraduate students. One third were from public institutions, and one-third were professionals self-employed as occupational health physicians. During the meeting, both invited and unsolicited contributions produced 186 oral presentations in five plenary sessions, eight sessions with pre-scheduled speakers talking about specific themes, and ten sessions based on free communications.

Session themes covered innovative aspects, such as industry 4.0, and evaluation of health damage and impact of industrial settings, 4P (Prevention, Personalization, Prediction, and Participation) in Occupational Medicine, ageing- and gender-related issues in biological monitoring. A plenary session was devoted to the impact of COVID-19 on Occupational Health practice. Parallel sessions were devoted to workplace injuries in confined spaces, professional activities in working settings and departments of Public Health, pregnancy and work, and tuberculosis prevention (with the presentation of the SIML guidelines) to ageing and work, and psychosocial disor-

ders. COVID-19 in Occupational Medicine was a theme widely addressed both at the clinical and preventive levels. About 50% of unsolicited presentations were about various aspects of COVID-19, from initial uncertainties related to diagnosis to current evidence about the effectiveness of vaccination. Such broad spectrum of papers provided a raw estimate of our discipline's role in the events surrounding the pandemic. To better appreciate occupational physicians' role in Italy, a precise and in-depth analysis would be necessary, but it testifies the commitment and quality of the work carried out by our Society's members. It should also be mentioned that many colleagues have been involved in technical-scientific committees at the national and regional levels. They contributed to the drafting of essential documents intended to provide guidelines for the resumption of work activities, especially following the first pandemic wave and the stringent lockdown measures adopted at the time, as well as regional technical tables for the organization and management of vaccination campaigns in the company. Last but not least, we have to pay tribute to the occupational physicians who died from COVID 19 contracted at work.

Some considerations are needed on the future, or rather, how we can imagine the near future. It is certainly not easy, and uncertainties persist about how the pandemic could evolve. There is no doubt that the relatively rapid and effective vaccination campaign contained the spread of the infection and reduced the severity of the cadres. However, it is not easy to imagine the scenarios in detail. There are broad-ranging issues such as the opportunity/need/obligation to proceed with the third dose of vaccine and issues related to managing no-vax people and their work fitness. In the first case, it is highly probable that, after the frail/elderly scheduled for next autumn, it is possible to move on to the professional categories according to an already defined chronological order, starting with health care workers. The second case is a question of managing people not compliant with the vaccination practice, either because of fear of adverse effects or ideological positions. The main issue will be deciding whether or not to grant access to work to those who are not vaccinated without risk to themselves or third parties. Such issues, along with

other relevant questions, were addressed in various sessions of the Congress. Just a brief reflection is given here on the world of work that the pandemic has given us. The most direct and immediate example is "smart" (or remote) work. In practice, it has allowed us to apply a model that we hoped to be achievable on a large scale in the medium-long term, albeit in a forced way. We imagined ideal conditions in which everyone could adapt work to their family and social life without the constraints in transport, rigid schedules, and interpersonal relationships. Smart working should be one of the building blocks of Industry 4.0 and related administrative activities, both in the private sector and public administration.

What are we experiencing now, 18 months after the onset of this way of working? A certain malaise due to social isolation, a certain dissatisfaction with spatial confinement, some difficulties in receiving adequate supports and technologies, an overlap in the moments of life and work. In recent days, the ministerial communication on the need to guarantee recovery by stopping smart-working activities in the Italian public administration. However, regardless of this choice, other aspects and problems emerged according to our discipline's characteristic points of view. How to organize the health surveillance of those in smart-working? How to evaluate the ergonomic conditions of the workplace? How to ascertain the psycho-physical well-being of the worker?

A few trivial examples induce a reflection on how the pandemic has substantially changed our lives and the complex world of work, expressing new perspectives for those like us who have the mandate to guarantee workers' health and well-being. Finally, two reflections that underline a transversal commitment assumed by our discipline. In the front row of the plenary room of the Congress there was a free seat occupied by the poster of the "posto occupato" (occupied seat), which reminded us that that seat could have been occupied by a woman who, however, had been a victim of femicide. It is a sad reality in a civilized and democratic country where over 100 women are killed every year, and the trend shows no sign of abating. This initiative will be a constant throughout my presidency as a proper tribute to so many innocent victims. The congress bag constituted the second

landmark. The bags have been commissioned again to the Dozza prison of Bologna, which has activated a tailoring workshop. The women detained there work side by side to reduce social prejudices towards subjects at high risk of discrimination. It seemed significant to us also for this edition of the Congress to

offer our contribution to fuel a significant operation: to return to a free and active life.

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Stalls of the Paganini Auditorium during the opening session of the 83rd Italian Congress of Occupational Medicine: note the empty seats and the participants wearing masks, because of the regulations in force, also for people with green cards. Bottom: Empty seat with the Occupied Seat poster and Congress bags.