

## C O N F E R E N C E R E P O R T

## 4<sup>th</sup> International Conference on the History of Occupational and Environmental Health San Francisco (USA), June 19-22, 2010

The 4<sup>th</sup> International Conference on the History of Occupational and Environmental Health was held in San Francisco (USA) on June 19-22, 2010 for the first time outside Europe following the 1<sup>st</sup> (Rome, 1998), the 2<sup>nd</sup> (Norrköping-Sweden, 2001) and the 3<sup>rd</sup> (Birmingham-UK, 2007).

The Conference was organized by the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) and co-sponsored by ICOH SC on History of Prevention of Occupational and Environmental Diseases, with the support by the US National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH/CDC) and the Center for Occupational and Environmental Health (COEH) at the University of California. The Conference covered three full days, with 4 keynote presentations, 5 panel discussions and 10 original abstract sessions, including over 50 oral presentations. Attendees included 135 scholars from more than 15 countries and among them some of the most reputed US and European historians of occupational health.

The event was preceded by a half-day workshop (June 19) on different methodologies in occupational health history investigations with special reference to archival research, oral history taking and biographical studies. The pre-course, a novelty as to the previous Conferences, was quite successful also thanks to the presence of outstanding speakers among whom Barbara Sicherman (USA), the biographer of Alice Hamilton (1869-1970). Going through the life of this great US occupational physician, Sicherman illustrated the tools used for retrieval of biographic information with special reference to the different sources (letters, private documents, audio recordings) on which her reconstruction was based.

Ronald Johnson and Arthur McIvor (UK) focused on the different rationales within the history of occupational medicine: the disease-centered, the gender-centered and the Radical-Marxist approaches. Besides, the two British historians carried out in-depth investigations on modalities

of oral history technique application also to occupation health. Actually thanks to this methodology, it is possible to better understand what has been in the past the risk perception at workplace. Moreover, oral history can provide information on how workers affected by work-related diseases perceive their own disability. At the end of the workshop, Dorothy Porter (USA) outlined the methodologies to be used in archival research within occupational health history.

The Conference opened with the keynote lecture delivered ("Occupation, Environment, and Health: A History of Interdependence") by Christopher Sellers (USA), one of the most reputed US historians of occupation health, who illustrated the historical relationships between work-related diseases and pathologies produced by environmental pollution. The recent environmental disaster caused by the oil outflow in the Mexican Gulf close to Florida and Louisiana coasts has been the starting point to describe the parallel history of issues associated with environment and workplace pollution. Even if these topics seem to be culturally separate and belonging to two different spheres of action, they are closely interdependent. Ever since the dawn of occupation health, Bernardino Ramazzini (1633-1714) had investigated workers' health as well as life environmental conditions. The present strong interest of occupational health in air pollution testifies the interdependence of these two issues. The reasons for the separation, within scientific research, of environmental risks from working risks, the former more or less focused than the latter along different historical periods, seem to be mainly cultural and political ones.

The participants were entertained during the gala dinner by a presentation on ancient medical book collecting "Antiquarian medical book collecting: a guide to the perplexed", delivered by Howard Rootenberg, a member of a reputed US antique dealers' family. Rotenberg indicated the present market value of some editions of ancient medical

treatises with special reference to occupational health (the “De re metallica” by Agricola, the “De morbis artificum” by Ramazzini). The ancient book collecting market apparently was not so much affected by the recent economic crisis.

Social and political movements, that have been developing during the past century on safety and health at workplace, were the object of the second keynote presented by US historians David Rosner and Gerald Markowitz “Movements for Occupational and Environmental Health: History and politics”. The lecture was held on the second day and focused on the different forms taken by such movements over the century. Generally they have been developing as a dialectics expression between trade unions and employers. Some of these movements however were originated by consumers who were worried by the possible harmfulness of the products they were using and hence the workers’ health conditions indirectly improved as well. This issue was then further investigated by the subsequent Panel Discussion with reference to USA (Allison Hepler), United Kingdom (Joseph Melling) and France (Laure Pitti).

Robert Proctor, an internationally well-known US expert of medicine under the Nazis and the author of a famous book “The Nazi War on Cancer” (Princeton University Press, 1999) delivered in the afternoon of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Conference day a keynote lecture “Occupational Medicine under the Nazis”. Actually Nazi Germany had developed an effective inspection system at workplace addressed to workers’ health protection. This policy was partly motivated by the fear of mutagenic effects of some working toxic materials, i.e. ionizing radiations, potentially involved in race degeneration so much awed by Nazi ideology. Even if only Aryan workers were protected, the studies carried out in that period on carcinogenesis of some substances (i.e. asbestos) could have brought about beneficial effects for the whole community. The results were however obscured by the military defeat of the Third Reich.

The subsequent Panel Discussion dealt with the development of occupational health in the other European dictatorial regimes of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century: the Fascist (Franco Carnevale, Italy), the Francoist (Alfredo Menendez Navarro, Spain) and the Japanese (Bernard Thomann, France).

Finally the last day opened with the keynote “Working Life – A Poet’s Perspective” by Pulitzer Prize winner (1995) US poet Philippe Levine. Known as the “poet of the working class”, Levine well described the living conditions

of workers in Detroit where he was born in 1928, and dwelled on some autobiographic notes. At the end of the lecture, Paul Blanc (USA), the Conference Chair and Brian Dolan (USA) focused on information provided to occupational health by art, literature and folk culture: “What the humanities teach us about the history of occupational and environmental disease”. The conference ended with some reflections on the possibility of introducing history into the CV of occupational health postgraduates (“Integrating history into occupational and environmental health training and practice”), promoted by Max Lum (USA), Julie Staun (Denmark) and Kjell Torén (Sweden).

Last but not least let us recall the contribution to the conference by Italian occupational physicians to have a thorough insight on the present state of Italian research on this topic. Ever since its foundation by Prof. Antonio Grieco (1931-2003) and under the previous chairmanship of Prof. Pier Alberto Bertazzi, the Italian historians and occupational physicians have always been active within the ICOH Scientific Committee on History and in this conference by number they were second only to Anglosaxons, who were incidentally the conference organizers.

Beside the contribution to the Panel Discussion on occupational health during the fascist era delivered by Franco Carnevale (Florence), it is worth recalling the oral presentations on Work and disease in Greco-Roman world (Michele Riva, Monza), Historical development of studies on neurotoxicity (Roberto Lucchini, Brescia), Ersilia Majno Bronzini (Silvana Salerno, Rome), Italian workers’ health between the two world wars of 20<sup>th</sup> century (Alberto Baldasseroni, Florence) Project of historical research on the Italian Society of Occupational Medicine and Industrial Hygiene, SIMLII (Sergio Iavicoli, Rome), Birth and development of INAIL, Italian Workers’ Compensation Authority (Giuseppe Bonifaci, Rome), Work of Italian internees in German concentration camps (Alessandro Porro, Brescia), Dawning of accident prevention in Milan (Bruno Falconi, Brescia) and Repository of documentation recording of ISPESL (Idillio Tagliaferro, Rome).

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