

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

Fifth International Conference on the History of Occupational and Environmental Health. Rotterdam (The Netherlands), April 24-25, 2014

The Fifth International Conference on the History of Occupational and Environmental Health took place at the Erasmus University Medical Centre (Erasmus MC) in Rotterdam (The Netherlands) on April 24th and 25th, 2014. The Conference was organized by the Yellow Factory, the Erasmus University and the Arnold Leuftink Foundation, with the collaboration of the ICOH Scientific Committee on History of Prevention of Occupational and Environmental Diseases. With this event, the ICOH international conference on History has returned in Europe, after the success of the fourth conference, held in San Francisco (USA) in June 2010 (1, 3). The other previous conferences of the ICOH Scientific Committee on History were held in Europe and, in particular, in Italy (Rome, 1998), Sweden (Norrköping, 2001) and the United Kingdom (Birmingham, 2007). This historical meeting was organized in the year 2014, that marked the third centennial of the death of Bernardino Ramazzini (1633-1714), representing a timely opportunity to commemorate the founder of the Occupational Health (2).

The event was planned as a two-day working conference, with two keynote lectures, twenty oral presentations and three plenary discussions. The issue of the fifth conference was “framing occupational diseases”. In historical studies the concept of “framing disease” was introduced by Charles Rosenberg and Janet Golden in 1990, stating: “[...] ‘disease’ is an elusive entity. It is not simply a less than optimum physiological state. The reality is obviously a good deal more complex; disease is at once a biological event, a generation-specific repertoire of verbal constructs reflecting medicine’s intellectual and institutional history, an occasion of and potential legitimation for public policy, an aspect of social role and individual – intra-psychic – identity, a sanction for cultural values, and a structuring element in doctor and patient interactions. In some ways disease does not exist until we have agreed that it does, by

perceiving, naming, and responding to it” (4). In the intention of the organizers of the conference, “framing occupational diseases” meant to identify the social and cultural response to work-related diseases over centuries, analyzing their acceptance by policy makers and insurance companies and their recognition by workers, unions and employers, and investigating stakeholders influences and media attention.

Eddy Houwaart, Professor of the History of Medicine at Maastricht University, gave two introductory lectures to elucidate the theme and the aims of the conference. In details, Houwaart initially described the different approaches of historians of medicine over the centuries, from mere bibliographies of the great predecessors to the concept of “geographical and historical pathology” by Augustus Hirsch (1817-1894), from the positivistic idea of medicine as a manifestation of scientific progress to the development of the Social History of Medicine by Henry H. Sigerist (1891-1957), Erwin H. Ackerknecht (1906-1988) and George Rosen (1910-1977), and from the criticism of modernization and Relativism by Thomas S. Kuhn (1922-1996) to Constructivism and the concept of “framing disease” by Rosenberg and Golden. In his second keynote lecture, Houwaart showed the application of the paradigm of “framing disease” to infectious diseases, mainly focusing on cholera and tuberculosis. For example, during the nineteenth century different meanings were attributed to cholera: cultural (exotic disease), social (disease of the poverty) and biological (contagious disease) ones.

After Houwaart’s lectures, the application of “framing disease” to Occupational Health was proposed by Dick Spreuwers and André Weel through two case studies, respectively on silicosis and burn-out syndrome. The issues of the oral presentations were wide and included the description of first recognitions of some occupational diseases (e.g. chronic solvent-induced encephalopathy, low back pain, as-

bestosis and silicosis), the contributions of pioneers in Occupational Health, the historical role of unions, activists and stakeholders in promoting safe working conditions. As in the previous ICOH conference on History, Italian occupational physicians and historians provided a determinant contribution to the event. Salerno (Rome) reported the role of Italian women pioneers (physicians, philanthropists and unionists) in studying women occupational diseases and Carnevale (Florence) described the birth of the Italian “union line against the harmfulness” in 1950s and 1960s. Riva (Monza) proposed the use of ancient mortality registers (e.g. parish registers) for investigating workers’ health conditions in past population, while the archaeologist Sguazza (Milan) interpreted some bone alterations found in ancient human remains as a result of work-related overload. Porro (Brescia) illustrated pioneering tools to prevent and to treat electrical accidents, developed between the nineteenth and twentieth century and Fano (Milan) described the birth and development of ICOH Scientific Committee on History, so commemorating the figure of Antonio Grieco (1931-2003), the founder of the Committee.

In conclusion, the conference represented an important occasion for scholars who deal with history of Occupational and Environmental Health, as demonstrated by high level of oral communications and by the active participation to plenary discussions. The attendees arranged to meet up in the following year (2015) at the historical sessions orga-

nized at the 31st ICOH General Conference in Seoul (South Korea) – where the proceedings of the fifth conference will be presented – and at the sixth ICOH International Conference on History to be held in Gothenburg (Sweden) in 2016.

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