

# Occupational Health Information Exchange

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**R**APID advances and developments in modern industry and agriculture have made it very difficult to keep abreast of changes and their associated health hazards. Every year new materials, new processes, and new stresses are introduced into the working environment in tremendous numbers. Each of these represents a potential occupational health problem until evaluated by experience or study. The usual public health data, such as morbidity and mortality figures, do not contribute greatly to the detection or evaluation of such occupational diseases.

This situation has resulted in a growing need for the systematic collection and dissemination of occupational health information by a centralized facility with the cooperation of public health agencies, medicine, industry, labor, academic and research institutions, and all others having interest and responsibility in the prevention of occupational disease.

The Occupational Health Program of the Public Health Service has recognized the need and moved to meet it by establishing the Occupational Health Information Exchange as a distinct and recognized activity within the program. The exchange is operating as part of the Occupational Health Field Headquarters in Cincinnati, Ohio. The establishment of this exchange represents the organization and intensification of an activity carried out to some extent in the past by staff correspondence and consultation. The specialized experience and knowledge of the staff will be an integral part of the new exchange, supplementing and evaluating the information services.

The Occupational Health Information Exchange will serve as a central agency for the collection, collation, and dissemination of all

types of information pertinent to occupational health problems. Most of the information to be assembled will fall into three broad groupings:

1. Information on the detection, evaluation, and control of health problems of the worker will include data from industrial experience; case histories of new or unusual occurrences, exposures, or illnesses; results of research and investigation; and morbidity and mortality figures on occupational diseases. Acquiring information on problems arising from new materials, operations, or conditions in the working environment will be emphasized.

2. Information on technological developments and trends will include data on the identity and nature of new materials, processes, and industries as well as basic figures on employment, production, and consumption of products.

3. An inventory of research and service facilities active in any field of occupational health will be kept current with obtainable information regarding personnel, projects, and programs.

## Acquiring Data

While recourse to the technical literature is intrinsic to such an information service, the primary purpose of the exchange is to acquire, evaluate, and provide unpublished or otherwise unavailable data insofar as is possible. A large, relatively untapped reservoir of unpublished, uncoordinated, or fragmentary data accumulates in day-to-day experience in industry and

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in occupational health research and service activities. Much of this material is not published because it does not seem sufficient to merit publication. Often limitations of time and personnel or other causes prevent publication.

By bringing together and collating such piecemeal information from a variety of sources, it will be possible to recognize or predict answers to many questions concerning occupational exposures and diseases. The correlation of data on exposures of humans under actual working conditions with results of toxicological studies on animals will be facilitated. Better information on the occurrence, nature, and prevalence of new occupational diseases and on the effectiveness of control measures should result.

Summation of data on trends in occupational exposures and inventorying of resources should contribute greatly to better utilization of both governmental and private industrial health facilities and professional skills. Through a better understanding of the potential and relative importance of problems, available resources could be focused on the most significant problems. A centralized inventory of research and service programs can provide a degree of voluntary coordination of the programs, expediting many activities and avoiding duplication of efforts. Areas in need of investigation could be called to the attention of organizations with the facilities and interests to deal with them. Inquiries could be channeled to the most authoritative sources.

#### **Information Sought**

To gather the necessary information for accomplishing our objectives, we must have the

assistance and cooperation of many sources. Industry, labor, the medical profession, governmental agencies, academic institutions, research foundations, consulting laboratories, insurance companies, allied information services, and a multitude of others are called upon to contribute information as they are able. No fixed form or pattern for the submission of data is contemplated now. Suitable forms and procedures may be worked out with any group able to supply material on a routine basis. The system must remain flexible enough to accommodate all sources, whether they are individuals or institutions. The ultimate success of the information exchange will depend to a great extent on voluntary and unsolicited contributions of information.

Information will be disseminated by publications and direct letter replies to inquiries. We anticipate that material will be given out mostly by correspondence in response to specific requests for some time, until files and staff can be built up to the point where new, pertinent publications are possible. We do not now plan to have any periodical bulletins, but will publish information at suitable times. Although the Occupational Health Information Exchange is still in the formative stages, we have considerable data in the consulting files and the staff experience of the Occupational Health Program is available. Already we have received contributions for our files and have answered a number of inquiries. We are confident that most persons interested in occupational health or public health will give us items of information as well as an opportunity to serve them.