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COVID-19 should be recognized as an occupational disease worldwide

The coronavirus has led to many deaths in recent months. COVID-19 patients are seen in primary care, in hospitals and in other institutions including care homes. Healthcare workers all over the world do a tremendous job of caring for them. In the UK, >100 healthcare workers have died of COVID-19. However, the world total is currently unknown.

For centuries, we have known that diseases may be work-related. Occupational disease is the term used to describe work-related illnesses. It is a legal term and is associated with financial compensation for the sufferers of occupational diseases. The definition of occupational diseases varies from country to country.

Healthcare workers may be infected with COVID-19 at work by contact with infected patients. Teachers may be infected by students. Public transport drivers, hairdressers, personal trainers and retail workers may also be infected. However, we do not know how many coronavirus cases are work-related.

There are several possible functions for occupational disease compensation systems. The most obvious is worker protection. If a person is harmed at work, he or she should be compensated. The worker may be unable to continue to work due to disability.

Another reason for using specific definitions of occupational diseases is keeping better records of the incidence of these diseases. Physicians in countries with this system report the cases to the national authorities. This, in turn, makes it possible to generate national statistical analyses of a country's occupational disease situation. One positive benefit from such disease statistics in a country is the opportunity it provides to evaluate the need for preventive procedures at work places. Thus the reporting systems functions for the benefit of all workers. It is therefore important that all countries develop both compensation and reporting systems for occupational diseases.

The coronavirus disease has been proscribed as an occupational disease in Norway since March 2020, but not many other countries have followed suit. The coronavirus disease should be recognized as an occupational disease worldwide to enable compensation, generate statistical analysis and plan preventive measures.

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