

A History of Agricultural Health and Safety

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The first milestone in the history of agricultural worker health and safety was the work of the Swedish archbishop, Olaus Magnus. He recognized in his *Historia de Gentibus Septentrionalibus* (1555) that grain threshers damaged their lungs by exposure to grain dust. The father of occupational medicine, Bernadino Ramazzini, generalized this observation in his seminal work, *De Morbis Artificum Diatriba* (1700) to recognizing that particles in a variety of occupations were dangerous to breath. These could be dusts from animal, vegetable or mineral. He particularly recognized the respiratory hazards to millers, grain sifters, horseback riders and tobacco workers. Ramazzini noted that farmers were at high risk of pleurisy, pneumonia and asthma, mainly due to exposure to “the inclemency of the weather.” In England the Threshing Machines Act of 1878 focused on the mechanical hazards of agriculture, but the hazards of agricultural work were largely ignored as the industrial revolution focused on the dangers of mining and manufacturing. In 1939 John Powers wrote that “During the past quarter century the hazards of industry, transportation, mining and construction have been recognized. For agriculture...there has been no such recognition, and farming, thought the oldest occupation in the world, remains the most hazardous.” That focus changed in the 1950’s with the creation of the National Institute for Farm Safety in the US, and in the UK the Agriculture (Poisonous Substances) Act (1952), and the Agriculture Safety, Health and Welfare Act (1956). The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) Act in the US (1970) largely ignored the agricultural workplace until 1991 when NIOSH was funded to create a farm health and safety program. The recent years have recognized the reality that agricultural work is now largely and increasingly done by immigrant workers, and efforts by government, academia and NGOs have focused on this vulnerable population.



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