Advancing Our Understanding of Migration, Work, and Health by Exploring Our Historical Roots in Social Medicine.

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Abstract

Occupational health has evolved into a fundamentally technical and applied field dedicated to identifying and eliminating hazards found at the workplace. While this approach has led to significant reductions in occupational injury and illness, it has limited its ability to account for the social structures that circumscribe occupational health outcomes, particularly for socially marginalized populations such as immigrant workers. It has also led to the artificial yet fundamental distinction between work-related and nonwork-related exposures, injuries, and illnesses which has evolved into a line of demarcation between occupational safety and health and other disciplines within public health such as migrant health.

This presentation discusses key concepts that have been central to the development of occupational health over time. Specifically, it explores occupational health's historical roots in social medicine and how historical advances such as the establishment of a regulatory infrastructure may have inadvertently contributed to its increased reliance on reductionist views of cause an effect that are prevalent today. It discusses the predominance of the biomedical paradigm in occupational health and how this has limited the field's ability to address occupational health inequities for socially marginalized groups such as immigrants. Finally, it discusses the advantages of moving towards a biosocial approach to health and how this could lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between work and health and allow the field to better address the changing nature of work arrangements and the inequitable distribution of occupational health outcomes across social axis.