In this special issue of Occupational Medicine

Celebrating 100 years of the Health and Safety Laboratory

Welcome to this special issue of Occupational Medicine, which celebrates 100 years of the Health and Safety Laboratory (HSL). The entire issue is dedicated to research from HSL which in itself is also a great achievement. Occupational Medicine is indebted to Andrew Curran and David Fishwick for their immense efforts as guest editors and we are grateful to all the contributing authors and researchers. We also thank Andrew Mountstephen, Kathy Codling and our diligent reviewers who have worked extremely hard to process the research papers through our peer review and editorial procedures, and ensure this issue appeared as planned. The end result is an impressive testimony to the research taking place at HSL in both quality and variety as well as reflecting the diverse nature of the modern workplace.

Occupational Medicine has been pleased to receive and publish research from HSL on a regular basis over the years and to celebrate this we have produced our second virtual issue, which features HSL papers from the last 5 years. In that time we have published more than 25 HSL research papers, which makes HSL the most frequent single contributor to this journal. The virtual issue can be accessed online and features papers which we feel have been particularly significant. In the paper issue of the journal we publish the accompanying summary and appreciation of this research [1].

An important role and goal of occupational health is primary intervention to prevent the development of occupational disease. The maxim that as occupational physicians we sacrifice individual patient gratitude for the satisfaction of knowing that we have prevented many more workers developing asthma, dermatitis or cancer is laudable and a worthwhile aspiration. But without an evidence base, any interventions may be an act of faith and wasted effort at best or may cause harm at worst. Behavioural interventions are of particular concern compared to engineering controls, which have an easily measurable exposure outcome. Unfortunately we also know that many employers prefer worker-based or behavioural solutions to removing or reducing exposure. To examine this concept further, Lunt and colleagues [2] carried out a systematic review of occupational based behavioural interventions with the aim of helping occupational health professionals reduce the incidence of occupational disease by reducing risk-taking behaviour. They identified 10 articles meeting their search criteria, although none of the studies covered the full range of behaviour-change components necessary for reducing exposure risk. Whilst worker-based interventions did achieve a positive impact on exposures these changes were small and the overall impact was ‘limited’. The authors found that methodological problems with the identified studies could account for this limited effect and they conclude that future studies need better design, implementation and reporting if behavioural change approaches are going to be effective.

The acute effects of exposure to pesticides in humans are well-documented but there is concern over the potential effects of long-term low-level exposure to pesticides. The Pesticide Users Health Study (PUHS) was established to study long-term health effects and is the only such national database in Great Britain (GB). In a review of mortality and cancer incidence experienced by pesticide users in the PUHS, Frost et al. [3] found that whilst men and women had reduced all-cause mortality compared to the GB population, there were excesses observed for cancer of the testis, non-melanoma skin cancer and multiple myeloma. Unfortunately the lack of information on confounders such as smoking, diet and alcohol consumption, as well as lack of outcomes relating to specific pesticides and working practices, means that causal links cannot be made. Nonetheless the authors conclude that as the only national study of men and women in GB who potentially experience long-term low-level pesticide exposure as part of their work, the PUHS has the potential to make a substantial contribution to the scientific evidence base about the role of pesticides in human health and to help to inform future policy decisions.

The other research papers in this issue include a study of work-related symptoms in nail salon technicians [4] and hairdressers [5], both large or growing sectors of the workforce with significant hazard exposure but little or no access to occupational health services. There is also a study of respiratory symptoms in insect breeders [6], a study of the uptake of health surveillance in workplaces exposing workers to noise and vibration [7] and a study on the potential use of biomarkers for occupational lower limb disorders [8]. In addition, Andrew Curran reviews the history of HSL and provides a narrative for a fascinating selection of the HSL photographic archive. Finally, in another first for Occupational Medicine, we have produced a podcast to accompany this issue featuring interviews with some of the researchers from selected papers. You can download the podcast either from links on the SOM, HSL or OUP websites, or through the SOM newsletter.

John Hobson
Honorary Editor

References