Crisis in the Workplace: Occupational Disease and Injury

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BOOK REVIEW


In May, 1972 the Ford Foundation commissioned a study of the nature and severity of occupational health problems in the United States. The final product of this study, Crisis in the Workplace, provides an accurate and convincing description of the nature and dimension of occupational safety and health problems in the United States, as well as a clear definition of the conflicting forces which affect regulation of the work environment and which must be reconciled before health in the workplace can become a reality.

Crisis in the Workplace was written by Dr. Nicholas A. Ashford. His credentials include receipt of both a Ph.D. in chemistry and a law degree from the University of Chicago. In addition, he is presently serving as a Senior Research Associate at the Center for Policy Alternatives at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Dr. Ashford believes that resources should be directed towards preventive actions in the work environment, rather than solely being spent on the treatment of diseases after they arise. The subtitle of the report, Occupational Disease and Injury, reflects this concern with the need for the prevention and control of both diseases and injuries inflicted in the workplace.

Despite an acknowledged lack of data proving that diseases such as cancer are caused by contact with toxic materials found in the work environment, Dr. Ashford justifiably assumes that such causation exists. To date, causation has been proven in the cases of asbestos, vinyl chloride, and fourteen other carcinogens; consequently, safe levels of exposure to these substances have been established. Given the large number of new materials introduced in the workplace every year, causation certainly will be established with respect to other toxic substances.
In attempting to define a solution to occupational health and safety problems, *Crisis in the Workplace* postulates the need for an interdisciplinary approach. After tracing the history and workings of the Occupational Safety and Health Act, the various state and federal workmen's compensation programs and foreign projects, Dr. Ashford concludes that the goals of a safe and healthful work environment cannot be achieved merely through legal channels. After thorough analysis he rejects the idea that sole reliance on any single policy instrument—research, medicine, market incentives, the law, or the regulatory process—can reduce occupational injury and disease. Dr. Ashford convincingly argues that inadequacies in the economic, political, scientific and technological spheres, in addition to difficulties with law enforcement, must be overcome if the work environment is to become safe.

*Crisis in the Workplace* discusses in great detail the array of existing resources available to help eliminate occupational disease and injury including research efforts, the manpower engaged in occupational safety and health programs, market incentives and educational and informational activities. The status of each resource is analyzed and evaluated, and suggestions are offered for their improvement. Herein lies one of the great strengths of *Crisis in the Workplace*: the author does not merely advocate an interdisciplinary approach to solve the problems of occupational disease and injury, but, by dividing the book into well defined sections, Dr. Ashford demonstrates what each individual involved with workers and their workplaces can do to solve these problems.

An extremely interesting area of this book contains a description and analysis of the conflicting forces (as Dr. Ashford calls them) which affect occupational health and safety and which have served as barriers to the effective regulation and elimination of problems existing in this field. Dr. Ashford identifies four kinds of conflicts which must be considered and reconciled. The first type of conflict is the clash between the differing self-interests of management and labor. As a result of management's concern, on the one hand, with cutting costs and maintaining control of the workplace, and, on the other hand, labor's traditional beliefs that health and safety are management's concern and that its own efforts should be directed solely to increasing wages, benefits and job security, the issues of health and safety consequently have been largely ignored.

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tion, both labor and management too often are concerned only with short-term and known factors; actions are taken solely to limit injuries which are immediately visible and costly to management in terms of workmen's compensation premiums, and to labor in terms of actual pain. Health injuries with long latency periods, such as cancer, are frequently ignored.

The second type of conflict identified in Crisis in the Workplace exists between the legal and scientific communities. This conflict arises due to the lack of a firm data base regarding the nature and severity of health hazards. This lack of information makes the establishment of safe levels of exposure to toxic materials extremely difficult, while making the establishment of the causation of disease almost impossible. The conflict between the legal and scientific communities manifests itself in the drafting of regulations setting safe exposure levels. The degree of certainty demanded by scientists in order to conclude that exposure to a given material causes disease is greater than that legally necessary to justify the regulation of exposure levels. Consequently, scientists often argue that the regulation is not justified because causation has not been sufficiently proven, while those responsible for creating the regulations argue that sufficient proof exists to warrant the protection of workers during the period in which scientists are attempting to establish conclusive proof of causation. How much proof is "sufficient" to warrant regulation is often a matter of dispute even among those who must draft the regulations. More concrete information regarding the nature and severity of health hazards is essential in order to eliminate these conflicts.

Perhaps the most interesting conflict defined by Dr. Ashford focuses on issues of public policy. A basic policy question concerns whether materials should be used until proven harmful, or banned from used until proven safe. The present controversy over sacharrin, although not taking place in the workplace, typifies this policy conflict. Another question concerns how risk should be allocated. For example, chemicals that degenerate in the environment or are used in a diluted form may confer important benefits to society while presenting only a low, randomly-distributed risk to the general public; however, the risk to the workers dealing with these chemicals in concentrated quantities are not randomly distributed and may be quite severe. As Dr. Ashford points out, the non-random selection of those who bear this added risk compels an examination of such a seemingly unfair situation by both public and private decision-makers.
The fourth and final conflict discussed in *Crisis in the Workplace* is caused by the lack of interrelationship among the various institutions, forces and mechanisms at work in our society. Those working on problems in the general environment are not in contact with those concerned with the work environment, with the result that their efforts are often counterproductive. For example, efforts to free a workplace from pollution may cause more pollution in the general environment. A method for coordinating the activities of these numerous institutions, forces and mechanisms must be found.

The greatest strength of *Crisis in the Workplace* is that it comprehensively relates occupational health and safety to the economic and social concerns of our time. Not only does the book clearly define the problems but it lays the groundwork for a concerted effort to reach their solution. The book does leave the reader a bit overwhelmed by the enormity of the present crisis in the workplace. However, the message is clear: if you are not part of the solution, then you are part of the problem.

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