

The renewal of workers' struggles for health and safety in the 70s in Denmark

Introducing myself:

Specialist in Occupational Medicine, engaged in the Danish OHS for 30 years.

President of EWHN, European Work Hazards Network, the living network following the worker-academic activities since 1970'es.

5 years in the Work Environment Consultancy in the City of Copenhagen 2008 – 2013 (OHS of Cph employees).

Denmark:

- **5 million inhabitants**
- **180.000 companies, a lot of Small and Medium sized Enterprises (SME)**
- **No tradition of OHS up to 1975**

1978 – 2008 the rise and fall of a multidisciplinary OHS system

1975 foundation of The Work Environment Action Group of Workers and Academics (AAA)

**Based on new collaboration between
workers and academics writing critical
reports on work environment problems**

**AAA is today a member of the European
Work Hazards Network (EWHN)**

**A long Danish tradition of
Occupational Health
Services (OHS)
without doctors**

When creating the new Danish OHS system. The trade unions kept the doctors out of the services under the motto:

”The workplace is the patient, not the worker”

Danish OHS concentrated on work place risk assessment, not on health surveillance

The specialists in occupational medicine were available in public departments of occupational medicine, which were part of the public hospitals.

Labour market partners, including safety reps had the right to refer to these dep. of occupational medicine, which took care of the individual worker.

There was a Department of Occupational Medicine for every 500.000 people

Danish OHS 1980 – 2008:

Legal executive order with minute description of compulsory OHS duties including demands of multidisciplinary and demands on collaboration between OHS units in order to exchange experience and make this experience common knowledge

Demands on multidisciplinary:

OHS should cover:

- Biology
- Psychology
- Ergonomics
- Chemistry
- Physical factors

Around 2000 the compulsory OHS system covered one third of the Danish employees in the most work environment heavy sectors, including some public sectors.

400 work environment experts were engaged in OHS, but only 20 doctors!

In the OHS centers the workers had 50% representation in the steering committees.

Decline of the Danish OHS system:

Change of government around 2001 to right-wing politicians, who agreed to phase out the compulsory OHS system.

The 118 OHS units shrank from 118 to 24 in 2008.

Danish OHS today:

Work environments are screened by the Danish Work Environment Authorities, and they can order the use of OHS on specific w.e. problems.

OHS is liberalised and most have become consulting bureaus which are engaged in a single project at a time and they do not necessary have any relation to the company with the w.e. problem

Danish OHS today:

The City of Copenhagen has a socialist City Council, and they have decided to maintain their old in-house OHS, which they have known and used for 30 years.

Today 50 experts are working for the 40.000 employees under the City of Copenhagen.

I was the only and the last doctor !

Danish OHS today:

The OHS work is changing:

Instead of preventing the collective work environment problems OHS is doing individual counselling of diseased workers with sickness absence.

More and more health promotion projects are developing including compulsory physical exercise for cleaning ladies during working hours

Danish OHS today:

Growing collaboration with the Human Ressource Departments. This means that the safety reps. and shop stewards are not necessarily involved in the problem solving.

The new motto is:

”This is between me and my boss”



ewhn.eu

article: History of EWHN

Article on history of Danish OHS

The rise and fall of Danish OH services in
Occupational health at Work 2010; 7(1): 26-
29