

OCCUPATIONAL DISEASE PROBLEMS

L.E. Hamlin, M.D. - Medical Director



Diseases associated with or resulting from occupation have been recognized for many centuries. While little is known about industrial health in the Egyptian period, specific information concerning it was recorded in Greek and Roman times. For example, Plato noted certain postural deformities among artisans while Pliny referred to the dangers caused by handling sulphur and zinc and even mentioned masks made of transparent bladders which were used by workers to afford protection from metallic dust during the preparation of vermillion. In the Fourth Century, B. C. Hippocrates recorded a series of attacks of lead colic in a lead miner and in the Second Century, A. D. Galen accurately described the signs and symptoms of lead poisoning. Other authors spoke of eye lesions among forge workers, varicose veins from the standing position necessitated by work, respiratory troubles and spitting of blood in dusty operations. The first historical reference to compensation for injuries dates to A. D. 643 when Rotari issued an edict making it compulsory for employers to compensate masons for injuries resulting from occupational accidents.

During the Middle Ages numerous publications related to the toxic action of carbon monoxide, lead, mercury and other metals and recommendations were proposed with respect to preventive measures.

The first real progress however began in the 16th Century with Paracelsus, a Swiss doctor and chemist who published a book on diseases resulting from the inhalation of fumes from metallic substances among smelter and foundry workers. Many other contributions were made during this period, and in 1690 Diemerbroeck reported that in making post mortem sections of the lungs of miners he gained the impression of "cutting a sandy mass" - thus the first recorded reference to silicosis.

In the 17th Century, the "learned and benevolent Italian physician, Bernardino Ramazzini" published his famous book entitled "De Morbis Artificum Diatriba" which contained more than forty chapters dealing with diseases peculiar to practically all trades and professions. These included metal workers, chemists, potters, painters, stone masons, textile workers, barbers, surgeons, nurses and many others. Because of his outstanding work, Ramazzini has become the father of industrial medicine and his treatise forms the basis for the extensive literature which now exists on the subject of industrial hygiene.

In more recent years the study of occupational disease has received such a tremendous impetus that it now ranks as a definite specialty in the field of medicine. Industrial Medicine, Industrial Nursing and Industrial Hygiene have now come of age.

Before commenting on several of the more important and prevalent illnesses associated with employment, I think it would be opportune at this time to clarify the scope of activities of the Medical Department. Since the problem of occupational disease was such an important one in the