

Verstraeten Johan
President of ISSA

Your excellency, Minister of Labour and Social Affairs

Dear Mrs Diamantopolou,

Distinguished guests and delegates,
ladies and gentlemen,

As President of the International Social Security Association, it is my great pleasure to be here in Athens, cradle of our modern democracy, and to convey the greetings and best wishes from 386 social security institutions in 149 countries around the world.

Athens, the city of Pericles whose name stands for one of the most brilliant periods of Hellenic history and will enlighten forever our western cultural heritage.

The home town of Soloon, politician, great lawmaker and inspired poet. His vision of government, the « *eunomia* » or « noble government », remains today more than ever, a perfect guideline for all responsible men and women involved in the welfare and well-being of the people they serve.

Athens, the city it is said that the father of modern medicine, Hippocrates of Cos, drove out the plague by the fume of great fires lit in the public squares of the city, thus taking the first prophylactic measures historically reported.

This splendid city where we meet today seems to me perfectly suitable for a conference intending to explore en discuss tools and initiatives for a better protection of human integrity.

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A basic human precept and key objective of social security is the preservation of the health of mankind, recognised by most countries as a permanent mission.

This is also one of the key goals of the International Social Security Association.

76 years ago, our association was created and co-founded by the International Labour Organisation, to meet the need for joint international efforts aimed at protecting, promoting and developing social security programmes throughout the world in order to advance mankind in promoting social justice.

By adopting this precept, the ISSA has therefore set for itself the objective of reducing the human suffering and financial losses brought about by work injuries and occupational diseases. Since the 1960s, it has developed a comprehensive prevention programme carried out by International Sections for the Prevention of Occupational Risks which are fully engaged in the fight to face down the challenges posed by the harsh realities of today's world of work, with the aim of bringing the goal of « Safety Worldwide » ever closer. Eight of those Sections deal with accident prevention in various sectors of industry and agriculture and three deal with information techniques, research and education and training. A Special Commission on Prevention, created in 1998, aims at initiating, coordinating and conducting at the international level, activities designed to promote prevention.

As ISSA sees its responsibility and role to encourage debate, to have an exchange of views and to share experience and information, the International Sections and the Special Commission not only organise technical events in different regions of the world, but equally proceed with important work on specialised subjects (pertaining to different branches of industry as well as concerning all occupational areas) through internationally composed working and study groups, and regularly release technical brochures and publications. One of most important event for ISSA's Special Commission on prevention is the World Congress on Occupational Safety and Health, jointly

organised with the International Labour Organisation and being held every three years. The next Congress is to take place in September 2005 in Orlando, USA.

Once more, today's event reveals the extraordinary dynamism of the Research Section and I wish to congratulate and thank our host, the Greek Institute for Occupational Health and Safety, and in particular Mr. Makropoulos, its President, for having it made possible to organise this event with the support of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. Your presence here today, your excellency, shows the commitment of government and the social partners, equally present today, in pursuing all efforts to strengthen occupational safety and health.

ISSA is also very proud to greet Honourable Mrs Diamantopolou, Commissioner of the European Union.

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What about safety and health in this changing world ?

Before handing over to the experts, I would like to point out the tremendous importance of initiatives like today's symposium for the preservation of safety and health in our post-industrialised societies.

The world is still a dangerous and risky place for workers.

In the European Union, approximately 5.500 people are killed every year in their workplace, nearly 5 million employees suffer work-related accidents involving more than three days' absence from work, and more than 75 000 are so severely disabled that they can no longer work.

As a result of various studies carried out it is estimated that, every year, work-related accidents and ill-health cost the national economies between 1,5 to 4% of GDP, an estimated 2.250.000 million US dollars according to the 2003 ILO Report « Safety in numbers ».

And these are only conservative estimates. The most reliable figures come indeed from those countries that are good at reporting accidents and diseases but these are also the countries that have the best prevention programmes.

Beyond those figures, the point I would like to make at the start of this meeting is to recall « **who** » we are talking about during the course of this highly technical exchange of international experience : **the focus of our concern and interest is the worker and his/her family**. The meeting is hence about them and how to better protect them against occupational accidents and diseases.

Work-accidents and illnesses are a huge cost for business but first and foremost a huge cost in terms of human suffering for the victims and their families.

Because after an accident or the onset of a work-related disease, a worker not only loses his or her earning capacity, but must face a loss of self-confidence, resulting in damage both physical and mental. How can we then evaluate this damage ? Even when available, money can never compensate for the losses suffered physically, mentally and existentially by these workers.

We also need to know « **what** » we are talking about : over and above human tragedies, there is a tremendous waste of resources. Occupational injury and illness are matters of health, but they are also matters of economics, since they stem from work and work is an economic activity. Apart from the incalculable human cost that they represent for the worker and its family, the economic consequences of work accidents and of occupational diseases are considerable.

As far as the economy is concerned, « non quality » of work is expressed in a loss of productive capacity and compensatory payments and benefits. Part of the economic cost is borne by companies, the other portion is indemnified by social insurance systems or shifted to the general taxpayers.

In Europe, we spend 2-3% of our GDP on the direct and indirect costs of occupational accidents, that will say 20.000 million ECU in the UE. At a time when social security and health systems in Europe are hardly rolling in money, the possibility of cutting this figure is of real economic importance.

Fortunately in our countries, the history of improving health at work has already tradition. It is seen as a collective concern, and community action for instance by setting specific standards on health and safety at work, strives for improved working conditions of workers.

For example, most EU Directives related to the area of social policy are OSH Directives (approximately 66% of them). This is a clear indication of the high status of OSH within the EU.

But health and safety at work are highly dynamic and thus difficult issues.

Due to the socio-economic changes, for example, certain occupational risks of psycho-social nature are developing or becoming more important. Concerns about stress are rapidly surfacing under the pressure of globalisation and increased world competition. They are already of 18% of all problems of health at work. New technologies, de-skilling, downsizing, job losses, job insecurity and poorer conditions of work are adding to the problems.

The other new trends in industrialised countries are the increase in musculoskeletal problems, asthmatic and allergic reactions and problems caused by hazardous material, including carcinogens. Today, we may all be carrying in our bodies about 250 chemicals that did not exist before 1945. People have benefited greatly from the new products of the chemical industry world wide. Diseases

have been cured or prevented. Food supplies have been protected. New materials have spawned new technologies and new ways of living. But there is a downside. Environmental exposure to harmful chemicals has increased sharply. And if the general public is affected, how much more so are the workers whose jobs bring them into daily contact with powerful, often dangerous substances.

It's important to note that hazardous substances kill 340.000 workers annually. Asbestos alone claims about 100.000 lives. Cancer, the biggest cause of work-related death, is responsible for 32% of such fatalities.

These new risks, whether physical or psychological in nature, call for methods, approaches and instruments for use by prevention specialists that can adapt to recent developments. Indeed, in a stable organisational environment there is sufficient time to optimise the existing system and once a preventive measure is realised, it will have beneficial impact forever. However, in a continuously changing environment, individual preventive measures have only a limited value and tend to become ad hoc solutions. Safety can only be achieved by dedicated actions : it is a dynamic result. Therefore, a shift is needed towards a process of proactive safety and health management.

We necessarily have to look beyond our current knowledge and to identify the new risks inherent in innovating technological processes or changes in the nature of risks. Therefore, our inspiring principle of prevention should be the principle of precaution.

As regards the application of European Directives on health at the workplace, standards are one important means for ensuring workers' protection. Many texts need to be modelled on the relevant provisions of the directives in order to ensure compliance. And states are required to work out a national policy for safety and health at the workplace. Yet enforcement of standards is not an end in itself ; it should not be an isolated goal ; it need to be matched by effective safety and health measures and the aim of today's event is to provide a forum to review the problems encountered in the application of adequate tools for the application of these Directives.

So where do we stand ? What has fared ? How can the problems encountered at the workplace be tackled in the most adequate manner ? Which measures have proven effective to that end ? And, are tools applicable to the new emerging risks and challenges ? These questions will be debated during the next two days, which I am convinced, will be extremely fruitful understanding that knowledge remains still very incomplete, that continued research and vigilance are needed, that new challenges will demand new responses, that co-operation and partnership are essential to the development of appropriate policies and that informed public is a vital support for the work that needs to be done.

Promoting a quality working environment, taking account of all aspects, requires thus a global approach, utilising all the available instruments, improving co-operation and increasing the flow of- and access to information, knowledge and skills development. Co-operation is sought through networking in order to maximise the benefits of the means deployed.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Our work today doesn't aim at squaring the circle, like Meton or Hippocrates of Chio.

We are here today to exchange experiences about the latest developments in risk monitoring to get a better understanding of the problems and to guide further research efforts.

But beyond those purely technical questions, what we have firstly to remember is that the main objective is to improve, albeit in an apparently prosaic way, the day-to-day lives of million workers, their complete physical, mental and social well-being and their physical integrity.

Before closing, I would like to express a special thank to Mr. Moncelon, who has been actively involved in the prevention programme of our Association since over 30 years. Mr. Moncelon who will retire at the end of this event was not only chair of the Research Section but also vice-chair of

the Chemistry Section, and thus very much contributed to implementing and furthering important activities.

I furthermore would like to warm-heartedly thank the vice-chair of the Research Section, Mr. Coenen, from Germany, who as well will retire from the Section after this event. Your ongoing input, Mister Coenen, has significantly helped and guided the Section in defining priorities and activities over the past years.

Dear friends, all our best wishes for a fruitful retirement and thank you for all the time and energy devoted to the ISSA.