

OCCUPATIONAL RESPIRATORY DISEASES TAKE A TOLL ON LABORERS IN CHINA: REVERSING THE TREND

Z. N. Frund, Ph.D. and Sherry Xue, M. S.

MSA

China continues to evolve from a rural, agrarian society, into an industrialized urban nation. Today, over 15 million township and village enterprises play a major part in China's growing economy; yet because fewer than half of them have implemented even minimal occupational health and safety standards, a significant number of occupational-respiratory related illnesses arise each year.

Silicosis and "miner pneumoconiosis" are among the most serious occupational lung diseases in China, due to their high morbidity and mortality and the large number of workers at high risk. The Ministry of Health reports over 580,000 cases of pneumoconiosis in China since the 1950s, killing an estimated 140,000 laborers. The World Health Organization statistics suggest that only 10 years ago, silicosis resulted in the death of 24,000 annually. Today's reports claim over 440,000 cases of pneumoconiosis, and project 10,000 new cases emerging annually. And sadly, workers contracting pneumoconiosis are, on average, only 40 years of age. Currently, the costs associated with pneumoconiosis are likely to exceed 14 billion yuan (approximately US \$2 billion), potentially impacting China's economy. Those at greatest risk are employed in the coal and gemstone mining industries and construction, with little awareness occupational hazards, safety and personal protection.

This presentation will discuss these human and economic costs in greater detail; existing workplace respiratory and respiratory protective device standards; and recommend intervention strategies/measures that would reduce the number and severity of these illnesses.