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AOHP Members Release Study Results on the Impact of Age-Related Occupational Injuries

December 4, 2013 – Two members of the Association of Occupational Health Professionals in Healthcare (AOHP) are the first to present research findings that directly examine how patterns of aging and occupational injury risk for the national healthcare workforce compare with trends across all industries. Ken Scott, MPH and Lee Newman, MD, MA, FCCP, FACOEM first published the report of their findings - **The Aging Healthcare Workforce: Employment and Occupational Injuries Among Workers in US Private Hospitals During 2010** - in the Fall 2013 *AOHP Journal*.

“The healthcare workforce is aging, but occupational health professionals who work in healthcare are ill-prepared to protect this aging workforce,” Newman explains. “There haven’t been many studies that have examined the relationships between age and occupational injury risks among healthcare workers.”

The newly published study demonstrates that as healthcare workers age, their risks for work-related injuries change significantly.

“We know from other studies that patterns of occupational injuries and illnesses can change over employees’ working lives,” notes Scott. “We wanted to see whether hospitals in the United States experienced the same patterns that have been observed in other sectors of the economy. Understanding the patterns of occupational injuries will help us prepare for the demographic shift that’s already underway in healthcare. As more and more healthcare workers delay retirement at 65, employers will need to adjust their programs, policies and practices to optimize the effectiveness of *both* older and younger workers.”

The study analyzes patterns of age-related occupational injuries using data from the 2010 Bureau of Labor Statistics Survey of Occupational Injuries and Illnesses and the Current Population Survey. It provides useful benchmarks against which organizations can compare the age distributions of their own workforces.

“Our analyses suggest that the injury patterns are different for younger and older workers. For example, workers between 18 and 19 years of age are the most likely age group to be injured on the job because of contact with objects or equipment. The same is true for overexertion injuries,” Scott continues. “On the other hand, injuries due to slips, trips and falls become more frequent as employees age. The risk of a slip, trip and fall injury was about five times higher among workers 65+ than workers age 18-19.”

“The differences in the patterns of injuries can probably be explained by a few things. We all know, for instance, that as workers age, their physical abilities change. Reaction time, balance and strength are among some of the physical characteristics that change over time,” said Newman. “On the other hand, the physical demands of the jobs that workers do changes with age, too. Older workers are more likely to be in supervisory roles rather than physically demanding ones, for example, so their exposures are different. Also, we know from other research that on-the-job experience plays a role in reducing injury risk. Because *young* workers are also often *new* workers, inexperience may explain some of these high rates among younger employees,” Newman describes.

“Regardless, the degree to which an aging workforce impacts an employer’s bottom line is going to be influenced by many factors. Considering that nearly 18 percent of the private US hospital workforce is within 10 years of turning 65, healthcare organizations would be well-advised to analyze their workforce demographics, as well as safety and wellness practices, programs and policies, that may keep older hospital workers healthy, safe and productive on the job.”

Lee Newman is founding Director of the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH)-funded Mountain & Plains Education and Research Center (MAP ERC) and a Professor of Environmental and Occupational Health in the Colorado School of Public Health. He is also Professor of Medicine in the Division of Allergy and Clinical Immunology and the Division of Pulmonary Science and Critical Care Medicine, in the School of Medicine, University of Colorado Denver. One of the nation's leading experts in the fields of occupational/environmental medicine and pulmonary medicine, he also co-founded Axion Health (www.axionhealth.com) which provides software, support and consultation services for employee health, occupational health, medical surveillance and emergency preparedness for health systems, hospitals, government agencies and Fortune 500 companies.

Ken Scott is the Outreach Director for the MAP ERC. In that role, he works with a broad group of stakeholders to promote safe and healthy work environments. He has a particular focus on helping organizations prepare for an aging workforce. An MPH graduate of the University of Washington Department of Environmental and Occupational Health Science, he is a PhD student in the Colorado School of Public Health’s epidemiology program.

The MAP ERC is one of 18 Education and Research Centers funded by the Centers for Disease Control/National Institute for Occupational Safety & Health (CDC/NIOSH,) and helps to meet the occupational health education and research needs of Colorado, New Mexico, Arizona, Montana, Wyoming, North Dakota and South Dakota. As a Center within the Colorado School of Public Health, MAP ERC works to improve the health safety, and wellbeing of workers. The Center supports research, training, and occupational health and safety by providing opportunities in the areas of graduate training programs, occupational medicine physician training, continuing education and community partnerships with businesses to reduce injuries and improve worksite wellness.

AOHP is a national association whose vision is to be the defining resource and leading advocate for occupational health and safety in healthcare. AOHP promotes health, safety and wellbeing for healthcare workers through: advocating for employee health and safety; occupational health education and networking opportunities; health and safety advancement through best practice and research; and partnering with employers, regulatory agencies and related associations.

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