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Editorial

Shift-Work and Mental Health Problems in Vulnerable Occupational Groups

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The accumulated evidence on occupational health over the last decades has demonstrated the high prevalence of several of health complains in workers of different industries [1]. Although historically scientific literature on work and health has focused primarily on the occurrence of physical illnesses, in recent years the studies dealing with workers' mental health [2], or those linking physical and mental issues [3,4], have been increasing significantly.

This fact is related to the growing evidence about the incidence of an almost endless list of potentially harmful factors present at work, among which psychosocial factors are highlighted [5], keeping in mind its potential affectation on worker's health and well-being [6], which can take place as a consequence of its inadequate management at the organizational level [7].

Of course, not all the groups of workers have the same risk levels regarding issues such as fatigue levels, stress indicators and negative health outcomes at the short, mid and long term. This is a subject that can vary depending on different factors, such as the physical and psychological demands of work tasks [8], rest periods [9] and complimentary factors present in the work environment such as social support [10] and perceived efforts and rewards for accomplishing job tasks [11].

Briefly, most of the recent evidence addresses some key occupational domains that present a significant number of risks related to the "shift-work", a certainly exhausting and irregular modality of working, which can substantially affect worker's health and safety over time. In short, those workers working in key industries such as healthcare [12] and transportation systems [13,14] are closely related to present very negative outcomes in this field [15]. Within these occupational groups, many studies have confirmed the existence of very high rates of negative mental and/or psychophysical issues: job stress [16], burnout [17] acute and chronic fatigue [18,19], sleep problems [20,21], anxiety and depression [22] and absenteeism [23].

In the specific case of occupational groups related to the transportation industry, where the professional drivers are located, a number of potential risks to health, well-being and occupational safety have been documented related to the absence of sufficient and adequate rest periods [21,24]. Some studies have even described a relationship between shift work of professional drivers and higher rates of traffic accidents than those with groups of drivers with single or continuous journeys [25] taking into account, among other factors, the progressive decompensation implied by the irregularity of rest and recovery periods, factor which can cause, for example, that acute symptoms of fatigue and stress become chronic along the time [8,17].

Although technically it is impossible to eliminate all risks related to the negative effects of shift work on bodily and mental functions [21,23], and essentially on circadian rhythms [26], some studies have highlighted the need to develop evidence-based progressive interventions to normalize the impact of work shifts on a margin of safety and well-being for workers [27,28].

It is an almost indisputable reality that the current economic system does not allow even thinking about the abolition of shift work. In fact, this modality has been conceived to increase of the efficiency and labor productivity. But unlike industrial logic, occupational science has a mission directly related to the welfare of workers [29], and should continue making meaningful contributions through systematic study and development of effective intervention strategies for reducing the vulnerability of occupational population [30,31], and improving the mental health status of workers in these areas of industry.

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