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Singapore Government

# PRESS RELEASE

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**ADDRESS BY MR OTHMAN HARON EUSOFE  
MINISTER OF STATE FOR LABOUR  
AT THE CONFERENCE ON INDUSTRIAL HEALTH AND SAFETY  
ORGANISED BY THE ENTERPRISE PROMOTION CENTRES  
ON 15 MAY 97 AT 9.30 AM AT THE PAN PACIFIC HOTEL**

I am pleased to join you this morning in this Conference on Industrial Health and Safety organised by the Enterprise Promotion Centres (EPC). I am happy to note the strong concern for workers' health and safety. A safe and healthy work environment will benefit everyone. It will enhance productivity and make our companies more competitive. A successful company should be able to provide better benefits for all employees in the company.

The key objective of this Conference is to enable participants to know more about recent legislations on the control of noise and chemical hazards at the workplace so that this can ensure quick compliance to promote safe and healthy work environment for our workers. Our workers work in various types of work environment with different work conditions. For example in the manufacturing sector, there is a wide range of industries and processes. It is imperative for us to have a thorough understanding of the hazards at our workplaces which can cause serious injury and ill-health. All of us agree that prevention is better than cure. In the case of noise induced deafness and some types of chemical poisoning - there is great urgency because ill health or disease may not be immediate, but manifest years later. This is because the effects result from long-term exposure and take time to

develop.

Safety and health hazards at the workplace should therefore be promptly identified and eliminated, or controlled so that injury and ill health can be prevented or eradicated. To do this, action should be taken to incorporate safety requirements right from the planning and design stage of our factories and workplaces. It is often cheaper and more effective to incorporate safety measures at the design stage than later when a plant is already operating. This would ensure that there will be least disruption to the plant's operations. It would also mean that workers can be safeguarded early before they become exposed to the hazards.

As you are aware, my Ministry recently issued 2 subsidiary legislations:

- (a) The Factories (Noise) Regulations 1996, and
- (b) The Factories (Permissible Exposure Levels of Toxic Substances) Order 1996.

These legislations are operative from January this year.

Let me touch briefly on the Noise Regulations, which address the noise problem in industry. Many factories are noisy because of the nature of work and the machinery used. It is estimated that there are more than 1,000 factories with a high noise level. To safeguard workers who are exposed to excessive noise, the regulations make it necessary for such workers to undergo medical checkups including audiometric tests. In 1996, more than 62,000 workers had such tests. The number of workers with noise induced deafness increased from 1068 in 1995 to 1302 in 1996. Noise-induced deafness is in fact, the most common industrial disease in Singapore. Fortunately the vast majority of the cases (1277 of the 1302

in 1996), were early cases where there was no significant disability. Early detection has enabled the workers to be treated promptly. Without precautionary measures, the workers' hearing would deteriorate over the years before they become aware of the problem.

The new regulations include all the measures which managements should consider in a control programme for the noise hazard. These range from engineering measures to personal protective equipment and education and training of workers exposed to excessive noise on the effects on their hearing and measures which can effectively protect them. The regulations also require noise monitoring by a competent person. My Ministry has arranged with the Singapore Polytechnic and the Ngee Ann Polytechnic for training courses to be conducted for such persons.

The Permissible Exposure Levels of Toxic Substances Order lists the permissible exposure levels of more than 600 commonly used chemicals. Over-exposure of workers to the chemicals can result in poisoning. In 1996, there were 19 cases of chemical poisoning and 45 cases of over-absorption of toxic chemicals. These involved chemicals like lead, mercury, cadmium, trichloroethylene, and organophosphates. The new legislations require occupiers to monitor the air levels of toxic contaminants in the workplace to ensure that they remain below the permissible exposure levels to protect workers' health.

My Ministry's Department of Industrial Health will continue to assist factories to identify and to expedite the introduction of measures to control occupational health hazards. We will continue to register factories and undertake inspection visits during which the sources of health hazards in the factories are thoroughly assessed and discussions held with management on preventive measures. To assist

management, guidelines have been issued on the control of occupational health hazards. Investigations into notified cases of occupational diseases and complaints on occupational health will be done expeditiously so that control measures can be speedily implemented.

My Ministry has promoted self-regulation among factory occupiers and management as this is the most effective way to prevent the occurrence of problems arising from excessive use of and inadequate protection from noise and chemical hazards. Factory occupiers and managements should familiarise themselves with the requirements in the new legislations and to take the necessary measures quickly. I would like to stress again that the control measures should be taken as early as possible for greater effectiveness.

This Seminar provides a good opportunity for the new legislations to be discussed to enable participants to clarify any issues that they may have on legislations. Better understanding of the legislations will enable preventive measures to be implemented quickly so that our work places will always continue to be safe and healthy.

It is now my pleasure to declare the Seminar open.

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