

OCCUPATIONAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH POLICY

THE SANITARY INSPECTION IN THE CONDITIONS OF SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION IN POLAND

RENATA SKOWROŃSKA and LECH T. DAWYDZIK

Department of Health Care Organization
The Nofer Institute of Occupational Medicine Lodz, Poland

Key words: Sanitary inspection, Sanitary supervision, Working conditions

Abstract. A great number of small, privately-owned companies appeared in Poland during the last five years as a result of the transformation process of the whole national economy. Continuous economic changes determine new requirements for the occupational hygiene branch of the State Sanitary Inspection which is designated to exercise control and sanitary supervision over working conditions in individual companies. The Sanitary and Epidemiological Stations are not capable now of ensuring permanent monitoring of various harmful agents even at those workposts which create true risk of health impairment.

Lack of adequate legal regulations poses a significant problem in preparing a list of companies to be supervised. The majority of newly-formed, privately-owned companies not only fails to be subjected to any working-environment assessment procedures but also to be kept on any file. One of the crucial problems to be solved in the nearest future is to develop the efficient system for the supervision of working conditions and, at the same time, to find the ways how to improve them. Courses to train occupational hygiene specialists and to advance the skills of occupational hygiene workers seem to be equally important.

The violent transformation of the whole national economy has been observed in Poland since 1989 that is for five years already. The continuous changes in the structure of the ownership and in the organizational and legal forms of the national economy result in establishing of a large number of small companies. Assessment of the working environment is required for all those new companies. They are characterized by a remarkable variability of the ranges of their manufactured products and, consequently, of the working conditions.

The changing pattern of the national economy determines the requirements for individual organizations designated to exercise control over various aspects of the working conditions in individual companies.

Currently, in Poland there are many organizations and bodies dealing with supervision of the working conditions (Fig. 1).

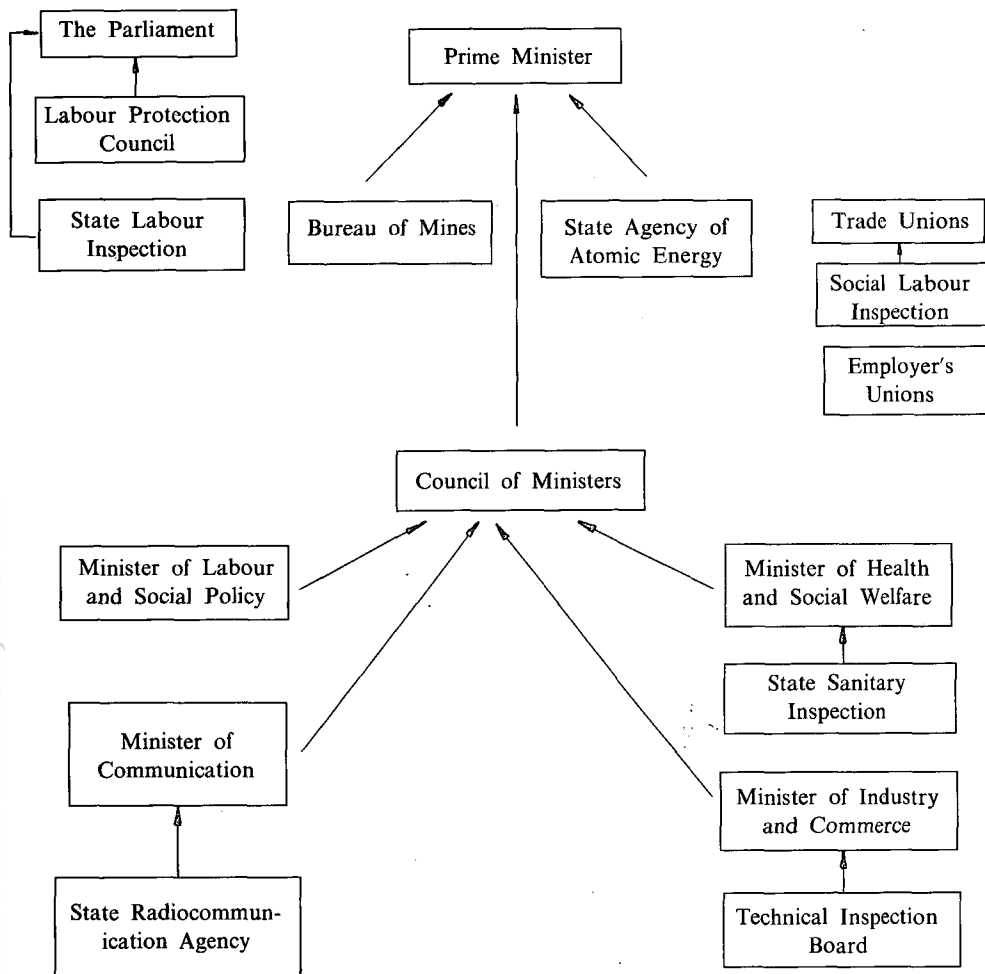


Fig. 1. Governmental bodies responsible for the supervision of working conditions in Poland.

The graph shows that the number of organizations interested in various aspects of working conditions supervision in Poland is great, probably even too great. Consequently, there is overlapping of responsibilities of the individual inspection bodies, and the resultant inconsistent interpretation of the legal regulations. Employers are apt to take advantage of the situation like that, often to the detriment of the employees.

There is, therefore, an urgent need to give an answer to the crucial problem: should working conditions be improved by establishing extensive inspection structures ("megainspectorates"), or by providing some other mechanisms which would impel the employers to improve working conditions in their companies, in general, and at individual workplaces. It is important to provide, among other things, economic stimuli, such as variable insurance premium, tax reductions, low-rate bank credits for the companies which allocate funds for improvement of working conditions.

The current Polish model of all inspectorates is based on the philosophy of the centrally-controlled economy which favoured big, state-owned industrial plants. This model is completely incompatible with the current situation, as there are already more than 1.6 million independent single industrial plants (companies).

The sanitary supervision is exercised in Poland by the occupational hygiene branch of the State Sanitary Inspection, subordinated to the Minister of Health and Social Welfare.

Occupational hygiene units with various structures and capacities function at each of the 49 regional, 319 local, and 7 harbour sanitary and epidemiological stations. In 1993 the total number of people employed at the occupational hygiene branch of the State Sanitary Inspection accounted for nearly 2000. Figure 2 presents the characteristics of the employees.

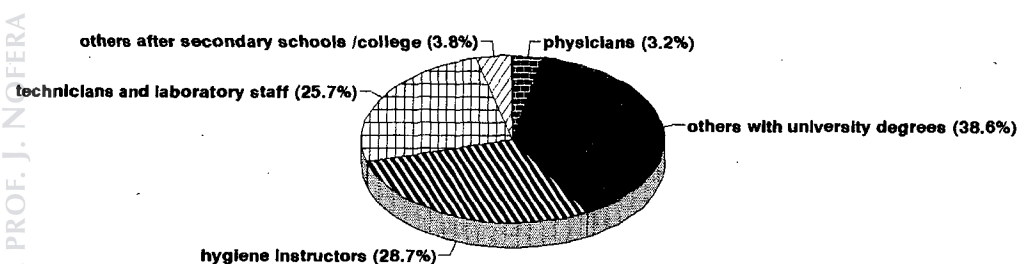


Fig. 2. Staff characteristics at occupational hygiene units of the State Sanitary Inspection in 1993.

In 1993 more than 73 thousand companies employing in total 4.5 million people were supervised by the State Sanitary Inspection. The majority (94% of the registered companies) were small companies with less than 200 workers (Fig. 3).

It must be stressed that providing regular supervision for the companies is, at present, extremely difficult. Many companies are at the stage of restructuring, many new are formed and many go out of business. The register of the companies to be supervised which is up-to-date today, will become outdated within one month. Many companies are operating at 30–50% of their normal capacity, and the assessment of occupational exposure of their employees is, therefore, not feasible. Deficient law causes that new companies do not request the State Sanitary Inspector (as they are not obliged to do so) to assess the risks and the sanitary and hygienic conditions.

When inspecting some of newly-formed, privately-owned companies (corporations, enterprises or small-business units) it has been found that many of them not only fail to be subjected to any working-environment assessment procedures but also fail to be kept on any file.

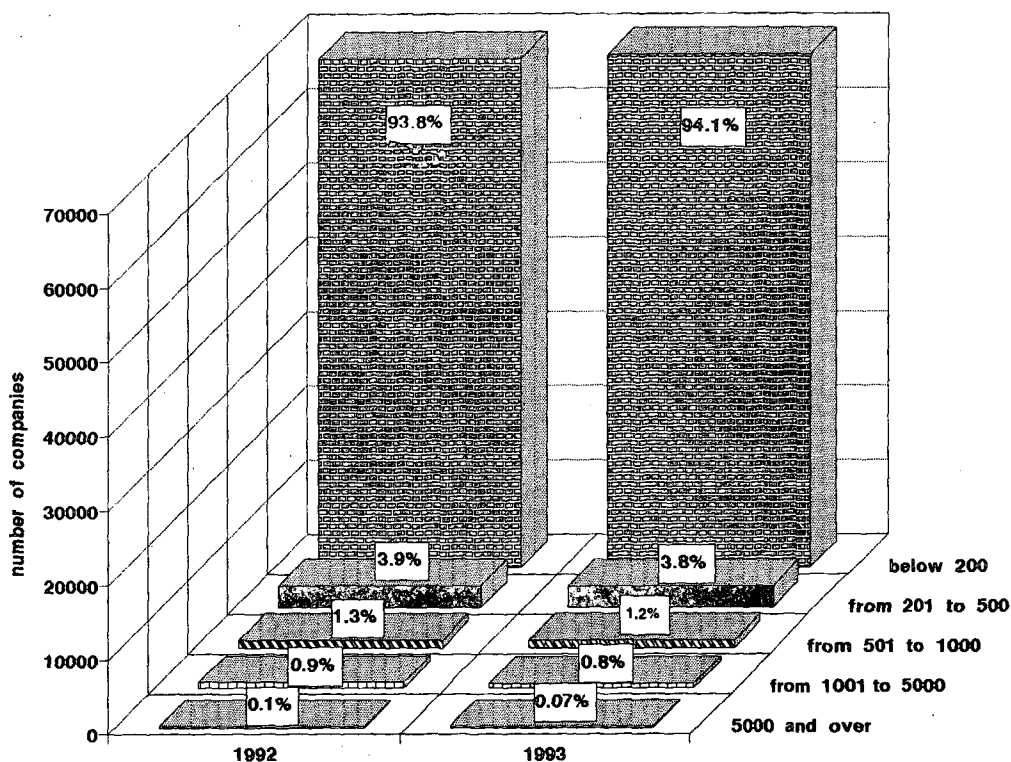


Fig. 3. Employment in the companies supervised by the State Sanitary Inspection in 1992 and 1993.

Lack of adequate legal regulations poses a significant problem in preparing a list of companies to be supervised.

To sum up, it should be stated that the Sanitary and Epidemiological Stations are not capable of ensuring permanent monitoring of exposures to chemical, physical or biological agents even at those workposts which create true or potential risk of health impairment. We think that the new circumstances shall transform the occupational hygiene units of the State Sanitary Inspection into units designed to issue licenses for conducting measurements and to monitor the quality of assessments performed by numerous laboratories.

Well-tailored courses to train occupational hygiene specialist (public health managers) and other forms of advancing the skills of college-level occupational hygiene workers are essential for developing the efficient system for the supervision of working conditions.

Received for publication: August 4, 1994

Approved for publication: August 12, 1994

