

XXI World Congress on Safety and Health at Work 2017 – through the eyes of a delegate

Occupational safety and health professionals converged from all over the world to share knowledge and new ideas, to learn, and to re-unite with colleagues and make new connections at the World Congress on Safety and Health at Work. This triennial congress is probably the biggest occupational safety and health congress globally. This year's congress was hosted by the Singapore Ministry of Manpower, together with the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the International Social Security Association (ISSA). The conference theme was 'A global vision of prevention' and had three subthemes, viz. 'Vision zero – from vision to reality'; 'Healthy work – healthy life'; and 'People-centred prevention'.

In keeping with the subtheme of 'Healthy work – healthy life', pedometers were issued to delegates at registration to count the steps they clocked daily. This was very useful, and I was pleased to note that I walked more than 10 000 steps on each day of the conference.

The opening ceremony was held on 3 September. The welcome address was presented by Er Ho Siong Hin, the President of the XXI World Congress on Safety and Health at Work 2017. This was followed by addresses by Mr Guy Ryder (Director General, ILO) and Dr Joachim Breuer (President, ISSA). These were followed by the much-awaited speech of the Prime Minister of Singapore, PM Lee Hsien Loong, who expressed excitement that Singapore was hosting the congress for the first time, and welcomed the delegates who represented more than 100 countries and six continents. The entertainment and cocktail session was well attended and continued into the late hours of the night.

The highlight of the second day was the International Media Festival for Prevention and Special Media Session. At this session, participants of the ILO youth programme competition showcased their work which included still and motion pictures, paintings, songs, documentaries, and poems on health and safety issues. A representative from Côte d' Ivoire, Africa was among the award winners in this competition. While this brought us great joy, we realised that, although there are very talented young people in Africa, only a few were aware of this opportunity and most of us delegates were not aware of this youth competition. I think we should look out for such opportunities and encourage African youth to participate in such events.

The Secretary General of ISSA, Mr Hans-Horst Konkolewsky, launched the three-year ISSA global campaign, 'Vision zero', at the congress. He outlined the seven

'Golden rules of vision zero': (1) Leadership commitment; (2) Identifying hazards and controlling risks; (3) Defining targets and developing programmes; (4) Ensuring a safe and healthy team and being well organised; (5) Ensuring safety and health in machines, equipment and workplaces; (6) Improving qualifications and developing competence; and (7) Investing in people – motivating through participation.

Another highlight of the Congress was the keynote presentation by a former NASA astronaut, Mr Michael Lopez-Algeria. He spoke on the need to keep every worker safe within the brotherhood of man. He gave a vivid description of the risks faced by astronauts. We all started thinking when we learnt that, when a rocket ignites, more than 10 000 things can happen but only one is good!

On the last day, Dr William Tan gave an inspirational speech which was the highlight of the Congress for me. He is a neuroscientist, physician, paralympian and cancer survivor. He is also the world record holder for completing a wheelchair marathon in the North Pole in 21 hours and for completing seven marathons, across seven continents in 26 days – both in the same year!

Following the official closure by Lim Swee Saym (Minister for Manpower, Singapore), there was an official hand-over to the Canadian team which will host the congress in 2020. The congress ended on an emotional note for many delegates as goodbyes were said. I was not spared the emotion. I quickly packed my conference bag and very briskly left the venue.

Amongst all that happened at the conference, the most important lesson for Africa is the evident leadership commitment that has been given to Work, Safety and Health (WSH) by the Singaporeans, and their commitment to achieving zero accidents and fatalities in the workplace. We should also be introducing such commitments in Africa in terms of leadership involvement, resources, mutual support and, above all, enacting enabling laws and policies to support all workplace health and safety approaches in the interest of employers and employees. This, to me, is the decent thing to do.

After Singapore, I look forward to Canada in 2020.

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