

Tao Li, China CDC's Chief Expert in Occupational Health

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If the national college entrance examination had not resumed or if the Chinese policies for talent turnover had not been established, Tao Li might have continued his grassroots occupational health work and might never have joined China CDC. Born in 1957, Tao Li had once worked at a county-level knitting factory in northeastern China for a year before China resumed the college entrance examination. As part of the first cohort of college students, Tao Li enrolled as a freshman in China Medical University in 1978 and earned a postgraduate degree in pathophysiology 7 years later. After graduation, Tao Li was selected to work in the Institute of Labor Hygiene of the Anshan Iron and Steel Company where he first

engaged in toxicological pathology and transitioned to field occupational health. For his outstanding work, he became Director of the institute from 1995 to 2002 and, during this period, studied under the supervision of Professor Hideyasu Aoyama at Okayama University in Japan for a year.

In 2002, China CDC was established and sent out a national recruitment notice for a Chief Director for the National Institute of Occupational Health and Poison Control, which was formerly known as the Institute of Labor Hygiene, established in 1954, of the Chinese Central Institute of Health (now the Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences). The original Institute of Labor Hygiene was the first academic institution engaged in the research of occupational health and occupational diseases in China, and its inclusion into China CDC was vital given the upcoming rapid growth of the economy and labor needs. After an extensive selection process, Tao Li performance led to his eventual appointment to the position. Over 15 years of service as the Chief Director, Tao Li engaged in the establishment and modification of related laws and regulations such as the “Law of People’s Republic of China on the Prevention and Control of Occupational Diseases”, “The Plan for National Occupational Disease Prevention and Control (2009–2015 and 2016–2020)”, “Administration Measures for Occupational Health Examination”, “Administrative Measures for Occupational Disease Diagnosis and Identification”, “Classification and Listing of Occupational Diseases”, etc. Furthermore, Tao Li has established a series of national occupational health standards including the “Occupational Exposure Limits for Hazardous Agents in the Workplace”, “Technical Specifications for Occupational Health Surveillance”, and the “General Rules for the Diagnosis of Occupational Diseases”, etc.

Tao Li’s tenure at China CDC has included several notable accomplishments including the reforming of the occupational disease prevention and control system, capacity building for basic occupational health services, nationwide, an occupational disease monitoring system, an occupational disease prevention and control system, and a chemical poisoning emergency response system. He has helped address dozens of major occupational disease events and poisoning incidents including Haichao Zhang’s pneumoconiosis and 3 migrant workers’ pneumoconiosis events in Xianyou County of Fujian Province, Shibing County of Guizhou Province, and Fengyang County of Anhui Province. In terms of scientific research, his team has received grants and awards from major national-level projects including the National Key Basic Research and Development Plan, the National High-Tech Research and Development Plan, the National Scientific and Technological Research Technical Support Project, the National Natural Science Foundation Project, and the Social Public Welfare/Industry Research Projects. Since becoming China CDC’s Chief Expert in Occupational Health, Tao Li and his team revised 2 major regulations and 1 national standard: “Administrative Measures for Occupational Health Examinations”; “Administrative Measures for Occupational Disease Diagnosis and Identification”; and GBZ 2.1-2019 “Occupational Exposure Limits for Hazardous Agents in the Workplace, Part 1: Chemical Hazardous Agents.” During the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, Tao Li also attended press conference to provide technical support for mass workplace reopening.

Following changes in the disease spectrum, ecological environments, and lifestyles, the factors affecting workers’ health, work efficiency, and the burden of disease have evolved. While traditional occupational hazards still exist —

e.g. pneumoconiosis is still the most serious occupational disease — and with the development and widespread application of new materials, technologies, and industrial infrastructure and standards, new occupational health problems emerge constantly and need to be handled promptly. For example, the emergence of an office-based workforce has introduced ergonomic problems that involve fatigue, being overworked, and musculoskeletal injuries, and acute, chronic, and traumatic occupational stress can also induce psychological, physical, and behavioral abnormalities. Compared with the relatively developed southeastern coastal areas, the service capacity, service efficiency, and coverage levels of occupational health measures are still insufficient in many less-developed areas. With the coexistence of multiple disease threats, health risk factors, and the imbalanced and inadequate occupational health capacities nationwide, Tao Li recognized that occupational health still faces major challenges. The Health China Action (2019–2030) plan implemented the concept of “Health in All” and set higher requirements to protect the health of workers throughout their entire career cycle. Tao Li believes that the national strategy presents a target and new challenges for occupational health work, and the end goal will ultimately yield better protections and priorities for the health and wellbeing of workers and an opportunity to further develop occupational health in China. As the Chief Expert in Occupational Health of China CDC, Tao Li will play a crucial role in this process and help provide a brighter future for China’s occupational health.

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