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Visionary Thinking About Global OSH

Alice Hamilton: The Blueprint
for Our Right to Know

By Ilise Feitshans

The Right to Know (RTK) policy has been described as the blueprint for operationalizing precautionary principles under the law to protect worker safety and health. Today, the U.S. government uses these principles to establish a law stating that employees have the right to know and understand workplace hazards. According to OSHA, inadequate communication regarding hazards—chemical hazards in particular—constitutes a significant risk to employees.

In 1930, Alice Hamilton, M.D., played an instrumental role in shaping the RTK platform through her involvement with the International Labour Organizations (ILO) Encyclopaedia of Occupational Health and Safety. Without Hamilton's motivation, OSH compliance would not have been possible.

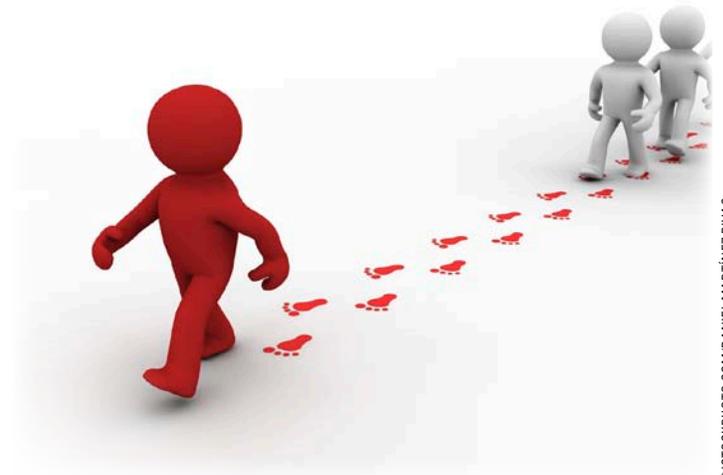
Although her work is often characterized as one-dimensional, a link can be drawn between current RTK principles and the theoretical underpinnings of Hamilton's efforts to make knowledge available to all. Three themes remain constant in her work and are reflected in the RTK principles: 1) respect the universality of human rights; 2) provide everyone access to empirical information about OSH; and 3) emphasize social justice that engenders equality among disempowered populations whose voices are not heard.

Hamilton believed in shedding light on industrial process and poisons, and accessing good data and large amounts of information that enabled her to review a situation and form an opinion.

The RTK is not one right but a cluster of rights that provide access to information and the ability to act on that information with immunity. The RTK, which for workers translates into the right to information and training about hazardous substances in the workplace, remains a core element of OSH laws internationally.

Hamilton believed in shedding light on industrial process and poisons, and accessing good data and large amounts of information that enabled her to review a situation and form an opinion. This philosophical belief, referred to as the RTK, ultimately became a key value in shaping the international governance that followed.

During the Progressive Era, Hamilton's work involved using a model for universal medical care that was classless and included topics such as contraception, maternal and child health, and fighting drug abuse. Through this work she met and addressed the healthcare needs of workers as well as people who are today considered vulnerable populations. Most significantly she saw and documented the poor health of workers in the lead industry and con-



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nected those conditions to their workplace. Hamilton teased apart the components of job descriptions and distinguished between various assigned tasks to identify different exposures and physical stressors faced within the printing trades; type foundry workers were distinguished from type setters who had direct contact with the letters made of lead. A century later, lead remains a problematic substance, and OSH risk management systems that require direct and effective risk communication have become part of all healthy workplaces (Feitshans, 1985).

In her autobiography, *Exploring the Dangerous Trades*, Hamilton set forth RTK principles and their importance in the context of daily life. Effective workplace OSH programs function in part to risk assessment followed by clear communication, as practiced and documented by Hamilton. Largely through her efforts, OSH transitioned from a discipline that focused on the understanding of work through specific diseases, toward a discipline that seeks to recognize, prevent and control exposures. Such transition required developing important public policy, medicine and management practices and, ultimately, a legislated commitment to the RTK about workplace hazards.

In her lifetime, Hamilton visited hundreds of workplaces, describing conditions and exposures, which were eventually published by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. In addition to her autobiography, she wrote an authoritative work on *Industrial Poisons in the United States* (1925) and authored 80 scientific reports on subjects such as lead, arsenic, carbon monoxide, cyanides, turpentine and related toxins.

Hamilton was prescient in studying and writing about some of the most important industrial toxins of the 20th century. For example, she identified benzene as a workplace problem, which later became the subject of major U.S. Supreme Court case (*Industrial Union Department v. American Petroleum Institute*), regarding the right of the government to regulate industrial toxins. This case was the cornerstone of the law of significant risk for limiting exposures to workplace toxins via governmental intervention that protects the public's health.

The first edition of the *ILO Encyclopaedia* enabled a cluster of scientists and physicians, who believed that knowledge could be useful to worker, employers and governments, to publish a single, comprehensive resource. Contemporary efforts including vast databases and national efforts to provide workers, employers and consumers with free web-based information about toxins from nanomaterials to more traditional substances owe a huge debt to this early work. Thus, the *ILO Encyclopaedia* was an essential step toward achieving the fledgling RTK in its time. Furthermore, Hamilton practiced occupational medicine in a manner that became the template for sound occupational health practices and ultimately is only effective with a RTK component. ■

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