THE CARE OF TRAVELLING EMPLOYEES

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Sending employees to other countries represents a substantial challenge to international companies. Such short, medium-term or long moves pose risks to the health of workers, which thus must be systematically evaluated and minimized by means of procedures specific for each type of risk. Occupational health services are responsible for identifying such risks and systematically requesting the collaboration of travel medicine experts in the planning and execution of preventive and protective actions.

When this is not done, a simple business trip might become a nightmare for both employees and organizations, involving often incalculable personal and financial costs. For this reason, international companies establish health programs systematized within the field of travel medicine, which enables them implement the same approach to prevention of risks and protection of workers no matter their destination. Therefore, in addition to their own resources, employers hire global health assistance companies, which provide assistance in health matters in behalf of the employers, from urgent/emergency medical care to repatriation in aircraft adapted for medical air transport when needed.

Health risk assessment in the case of travels should consider the following categories:

- Risks related to some pre-existing condition
- Risks related to the job activities which will be performed
- Risks related to the destination (and eventual travel stops)

Although the number of workers who require medical care during or after short trips is very small, this is no reason to disregard this significant field of prevention. Some symptoms might pass entirely unnoticed, or be confounded with some other disorder, when workers are not aware of warning signals pointing to the need of immediate medical care, do not report recently visited countries to their attending physician, or physicians have no experience in this subject.

For these reasons, and aiming at prevention and the protection of workers, some companies have a clear approach to travel medicine, and consider several preventive actions before and during trips. The ties between occupational medicine and travel medicine are tight, and communication is permanent and continuously updated. In cases considered as of high risk, involvement of local teams at the destination is mandatory.

For the purpose of accurate orientation, destinations are categorized as low-, medium-, high- and very high-risk countries. This categorization does not only depend on the locally prevalent diseases, but also on the availability and location of health resources, the possibility to communicate in a foreign language, and accessibility. In some countries (e.g., Brazil, Russia, China and Canada), different regions are attributed different categories of risk.

This categorization notwithstanding, companies are recommended to provide specific training every 2 years to all employees, especially the ones on work trips, on possible dangers while travelling. Previous medical examination is mandatory in the case of high- and very high-risk countries, and recommended for all others.

The list of vaccines required for each destination is made available from as an easy accessible table, is updated annually by experts, and follows international standards. In case of doubts, broader vaccine coverage is always the best option!

During consultations, the required healthcare actions are discussed, and orientation is given on (generic and specific) prevention and protection as a way to reduce risk. Consultations should include the employee’s family in the case of expatriation. One of the main difficulties in this regard is the adherence to medium- and long-term treatments, as e.g., antimalarial medications.

Some international companies developed quick information processes for outbreaks arising anywhere in the world, so that travelling employees can receive the proper information through several channels: generic, targeting all the employees, and specific, targeting the individual employee. At the time the authorization to issue the tickets is granted the employee should receive an e-mail listing all the diseases prevalent at the destination, care required, and necessary preventive measures;
orientation on the need to make a previous travel medicine appointment; useful local and regional contacts for emergencies; and the global health assistance company contact data. As an additional preventive measure, for destinations requiring previous travel authorization, companies deliver a presentation with all the information needed on safety and health, and reinforce the need for vaccination and necessary preventive medications.

Only continuous teamwork allows reducing health risks through prevention and protection of workers. Occupational health professionals have health risk assessment as a responsibility, working in multidisciplinary teams, in which context travel medicine plays a fundamental and crucial role.