Analysis of the international contribution to occupational health research

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ABSTRACT

Background: The importance of international research is established in achieving the World Health Organization’s vision of “occupational health for all”.

Aims: To describe the geographical distribution of research published in leading occupational health journals and to consider the hypothesis that the Inverse Care Law applies to the quantity and subjects of research between economic groups.

Methods: Papers published in seven leading occupational health journals in 2011 and 2012 were identified and attributed to a country and subject of research. The crude rate and rates adjusted by GDP, GNI per capita and population were calculated for each country. The distribution of subjects of research was compared between high and low/medium income countries, using three categories (hazards, occupations and diseases).

Results: 1466 papers were identified, from 56 countries. Over half of the papers were published by authors based in four countries (USA, UK, Netherlands and Japan). The leading 10 countries contributed 76% of the total number of papers. 89% of papers were from high income countries.

Analysis of the rate of publications by population and GDP revealed dominance by Scandinavian countries.

The distribution of subjects of research showed a significant difference between high income and low/medium income countries in two out of three categories (hazards and occupations).

Conclusion: The study demonstrated that the majority of research published in high impact occupational health journals is produced in a small number of high income countries and that this has not changed over the last decade. There is evidence of the Inverse Care Law applying to the quantity of research between economic groups, but not in the subjects of that research. This risks research being biased to the needs of high income countries rather than the wider international community, affecting the realisation of the goal of “occupational health for all”.

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