

KEYNOTE SPEECH BY MR MELVIN YONG, NTUC ASSISTANT SECRETARY-GENERAL, AT THE 17TH SISO WSHO CONFERENCE HELD ON 24 OCT 2019 AT THE MBS CONVENTION CENTRE

SISO Honorary President, Mr Seet Choh San

Commissioner for Workplace Safety and Health, Mr Silas Sng

WSH Council Chairman, Mr John Ng

Tripartite Sisters and Brothers, Distinguished Guests,

1. Good Morning. I am honoured to have been invited by the Singapore Institution of Safety Officers (SISO) to give a keynote address at today's conference.
2. Safety officers and Workplace Safety and Health (WSH) practitioners play an important and invaluable role in every industry. You are the key stewards responsible for guiding the actions of your companies towards a safer workplace. It is because of your efforts, no matter how big or small, that allow many of our workers to return home to their families safe and sound.

3. But the work is never complete, because we believe that every workplace accident is preventable, and we must not rest on our laurels until we achieve our Vision Zero aspiration.
4. The launch of the Skills Framework for WSH is yet another important milestone in our Vision Zero journey, by providing you with a clear map of the skillsets and training required for you to do better in your roles and progress in your careers.
5. In line with the theme of today's conference, which touches on how we can gear up to achieve our WSH2028 objectives, I will take some time to talk about the invisible but ever-present danger that is affecting our workforce, how if left unchecked, it could derail Singapore's Vision Zero Movement, and the vital role of WSH professionals to combat this.
6. But first, let me touch on the collective work that we need to do to make our workplaces safer and healthier.

Decrease in Workplace Fatalities Encouraging, But Not Good Enough

7. According to the latest National Workplace Safety and Health Statistics, the first half of 2019 saw 17 workplace fatalities. To put this into context, this figure is fewer than the 23 fatalities in the second half of 2018 and 18 in the first half of 2018.
8. It is heartening to note that the number of workplace fatalities has decreased. However, the number of non-fatal workplace injuries had increased by 8 percent from 6,073 cases in the first half of 2018 to 6,561 cases in first half of 2019.
9. This increase in workplace injuries is certainly a cause for concern, and it raises a couple of questions. Could the decrease in workplace fatalities be due to sheer luck? Or perhaps is it the case that medical technology is so advanced now that workers who suffered injuries which could have been fatal previously, now have better odds of survival today?
10. How many of the major injuries would have been fatal if they had happened a few years ago? We will never know.

11. Despite the improvements in medical technologies making it now possible for doctors to save the lives of those who suffer what used to be fatal injuries, every accident that happens – even the minor ones – is a danger to our workers. Inherent in every injury is the risk that it may deteriorate and result in a tragedy. Seemingly minor injuries at the first instance can turn into a major injury, and a major injury can lead to death. Unfortunately, as the statistics have shown, in 17 of the accidents that happened in the first half of 2019, the victims succumbed to their injuries. They did not make it home.

12. Last month, Parliament passed the Work Injury Compensation Act (Amendment) Bill. I was heartened at the timely amendments, as it will provide a faster and better way to compensate employees in the event of an unfortunate accident. But more must be done to prevent accidents from happening in the first place.

Leveraging Technology to Reduce Fall from Heights

13. According to the latest WSH statistics, one of the leading causes of fatal injuries sustained in the first half of 2019 was “Falls from Height”. Four workers died from falling from height, of which two were in the construction sector.

14. To reduce such unfortunate accidents from happening, companies must embrace the use of innovative technologies to inculcate a safe working culture. Let me flash up some examples of how some have done so.

15. In February this year, I visited GS Engineering & Construction's Safety and Innovation School. During the visit, I saw how the company has used technology to allow workers to simulate some common safety pitfalls found in the construction site. One example, which you can see from the screen, is how they get workers to experience the feeling of falling from height. They ask their workers to stand on a platform, which then gives way from underneath them and they fall. Of course, this is just a simulation, and the workers are wearing safety harnesses. But from using such technologies to provide experiential learning to workers, they become a lot more mindful about falls from height at work.

16. Another breakthrough piece of technology used to foster safer workplace practices is Virtual Reality (VR). Here is a picture of me learning how to safely operate machinery through VR. It is a great way to teach workers how to operate dangerous machinery in a safe environment.

Virtual reality can also be used to teach workers how to safely work from height – and NTUC’s LearningHub has been experimenting the use of such VR tools for work-at-height courses since 2017.

Total WSH Means Looking Beyond Just Workplace Safety

17. While it is important that we continue to improve Workplace Safety practices, we need to look at WSH holistically by placing equal emphasis on Workplace Health, which is the latter – and often overlooked – half of the WSH equation.
18. I call on everyone present here today to be the Total WSH ambassadors in your company and encourage your management and fellow colleagues to lead a healthy lifestyle at the workplace.
19. For instance, those with staff canteens can provide healthier eating options, to encourage workers to take good care of their health. The canteens operated by the National Transport Workers Union (NTWU) have done exactly this through our Brown Rice campaign, which has been a big success across our 46 canteens located islandwide. A total of 50,000 plates of brown rice were sold to members across our NTWU canteens within 6 months!

Earlier this month, NTWU received the Singapore HEALTH (which stands for Helping Employees Achieve Life-Time Health) Award presented by the Health Promotion Board. The award recognised the union's strong commitment in promoting healthy eating at the workplace

20. Getting everyone to embrace healthy eating is not as easy as it sounds. NTWU also tried to promote sugar-free drinks, such as Kopi-O kosong and Teh-O kosong. Unfortunately, this was not as successful as the brown rice initiative, but we will try again. Our newest initiative, which we have just launched this month, is called 'Apple of the Month', where we provide free apples at all NTWU canteens on every last Friday of the month. I hope that this will help increase the fibre and vitamin intake among our public transport workers.

21. Through constant experimentation, I believe that we will be able to find the right initiatives to encourage healthy eating among our workers. The Labour Movement stands ready to partner with companies to introduce initiatives to promote healthy eating and achieve Total WSH.

Rethinking the Paradigm of Occupational Diseases to Include Mental Health Issues

22. Finally, let me talk about the invisible danger that lurks within our workplaces.
23. Our jobs are becoming increasingly desk-bound, particularly for many of our SMEs. Studies have shown that sedentary jobs give rise to new forms of Occupational Diseases, many of which are not covered under the Work Injury and Compensation Act (WICA). For example, long working hours coupled with a stressful workplace environment can result in mental health issues such as workplace burnout, which is now a recognised occupational phenomenon by the World Health Organisation (WHO). Feeling “burnt out” is a common phrase we hear among workers, but little has been done to learn more about its longer-term health effects.
24. Such occupation-related mental health issues can and have led to negative physical health outcomes. According to a recent study by Cigna, Singaporeans are among the most stressed at work globally, with almost one in eight considering their stress as unmanageable.

25. MOM's latest WSH statistics, which show that the total number of Occupational Diseases has fallen by 11 percent, only reflects the paradigm of today's definition of Occupational Disease. In my parliamentary speech last month during the debate on the Work Injury and Compensation Bill, I called on MOM to consider expanding the list of Occupational Diseases covered under WICA to include mental health issues arising from the workplace. Even if we are not ready to do so, we should at least initiate more studies on the effects of such workplace mental health issues.

26. The NTUC, through our unions and association partners, have begun taking steps to address such mental health issues in certain sub-sectors. For example, to help healthcare workers better manage the heavy emotional demand of their daily jobs, the Healthcare Services Employees' Union (HSEU) collaborated with the Association of Psychotherapists and Counsellors Singapore (APACS) to roll out free talks and workshops to healthcare workers on how to manage their work stress and maintain high levels of emotional well-being.

HSEU and APACS have also worked closely with the National University Hospital (NUH) to roll out free counselling sessions for their healthcare workers. Till date, over 60 NUH staff have benefitted from such counselling sessions.

27. I am heartened to know that SISO has also taken the lead in advocating for the topics of mental wellness at work. In doing so, SISO helps to socialise the importance of workplace mental health issues. This also goes a long way to destigmatise workplace mental health issues among WSH practitioners and the general public.

Ever-Growing Importance of WSH Professionals

28. I will conclude by saying that today's launch of the Skills Framework for WSH serves as a timely and important reminder in two ways.
29. Firstly, it is a reminder to companies that WSH practitioners are important assets they must continually invest in. I know that some companies see WSH roles as a regulatory and compliance burden. It is not uncommon for such companies to require their WSH staff to double, or even triple-hat in their jobs. This should not be the case.

In many of my parliamentary speeches touching on WSH, I have often called for every company, in every industry, to have a dedicated WSH representative to look after the well-being of their employees. I will continue to make such calls until it becomes a reality.

30. Secondly, to WSH practitioners, the Skills Framework is an important reminder to constantly upgrade your skills, in order to seize the opportunities that the future holds. As the conversations about ensuring the holistic mental well-being of our workers continue to gain traction, I foresee that the role of WSH practitioners will evolve in tandem the definition of Total WSH. Perhaps in the future, we will see WSH practitioners with a specialisation in mental wellness.
31. Fundamentally, no sector can ever immune to disruptions. To deal with disruptions, there can be two options. We can either “wait and see” or we proactively take control and shape the future. It is an indeed an exciting time to be a WSH professional. The NTUC is here to help proactively look out for disruptive trends, develop training initiatives to help you outpace disruption, and help you progress in your career.
32. Thank you.