Fifty-four students attended the week long course in Hanoi in occupational health sponsored by the Vietnamese National Institute of Occupational and Environmental Health, the American Industrial Hygiene Association and Workplace Health Without Borders. More than 80% of those attending had MDs, PhDs and/or masters in public health. About half of the attendees were from the National Institute of Occupational and Environmental Health in Hanoi as well as from other parts of Viet Nam including Ho Chi Minh City. The directors from the Ministries of Health in Cambodia and Laos also attended the course. The course would not have been possible without the leadership and vision of Dr. Doan Ngoc Hai, the General Director of the Vietnamese Institute of Occupational and Environmental Health, and Dr. Nguyen Thai Hiep Nhi, the Vice Head of Planning and International Collaboration Department.

The course content was developed by the Occupational Health Training Association (OHTA) as an introduction to occupational/industrial hygiene to help fill the knowledge gap in developing countries as they increase industrial production. Vietnam has a growing industrial sector and many Vietnamese physicians and scientists are concerned about workers’ health in Vietnam as industrialization increases. Because Vietnam currently has no certified occupational hygienists, the Institute decided to invite a team of industrial hygienists and scientists to help them develop occupational hygiene capacity.

Elaine Lindars, PhD, COH, the lead instructor, was assisted by Mary O’Reilly, PhD, CIH, and guest lecturers Jonathan Haney, CIH (ret), Tuan Nguyen, CIH, MBA and Noel Tresider, COH. Tuan Nguyen, MBA, CIH, and a Vietnamese-American, orchestrated the entire course with tireless and inspiring energy. Without Tuan the team would not have been able to understand the subtleties of Vietnamese culture and communicate effectively with the students and the Institute.

The students were very bright, highly educated, extremely hard working and very warm and friendly. Many of them are working in a variety of workplaces and are very proud of the new regulation that requires annual medical evaluation of workers including lung function tests, audiometry and blood work. Similar to developed countries, it is often difficult to persuade employers to spend the money required to perform the medical evaluations. As Vietnam anticipates expanding industrial productions the country wants to keep its workers healthy.

The course covered the recognition and evaluation of workplace hazards such as industrial chemicals, noise, heat and psychosocial stress. Controls, such as ventilation, work reorganization, noise and respiratory protection, were discussed. The importance of ergonomic design and reducing stress in the workplace was recognized. A special section was devoted to hazards specific to the oil and gas industry. One focus of the Institute is climate change and its effect on heat stress in the workplace.
The Institute invited the student and teachers to a fabulous buffet on Tuesday evening. Dr. Hai presented a toast and Dr. Hiep Nhi joined the group for the evening. The dinner was a wonderful way for teachers and students to feel more comfortable with each other. That was particularly important to facilitate the exchange of ideas and increase the level of interaction. Students in the class were very interested in how developed countries address psychosocial stress in the workplace. The class provided the structure for many interesting discussions of the similarities and differences in workplace health between developing and developed countries.

The course also provided an opportunity for the Vietnamese National Institute of Occupational and Environmental Health and Workplace Health Without Borders to envision how they could cooperate to develop education and research opportunities in the future. By the end of the week there were many personal and professional friendships and the hope and expectation that this course was the beginning of an enriching and productive partnership. With the coordinated efforts of Tuan, Dr. Hai and Dr. Hiep Nhi, we were able to invite the Health Affairs Attaché of the US Embassy in Vietnam, Dr. Jeffrey O’Dell to join the trainers to present the training certificates to the students.
Tuan Nguyen leading the discussion with the students after our visit to a local factory. This was a lively discussion with much interaction as we debated recognition, evaluation, prioritization and possible controls.

Last Day with the Head of the Office of Health Affairs at the US Embassy, Dr. Jeffrey O’Dell (in the middle) and Dr. Hai, Director of the Vietnamese Institute for Occupational and Environmental Health (white shirt) along with the WHWB team (Noel Tresider, Dr. Mary O’Reilly, Jonathan Haney, Tuan Nguyen, and Dr. Elain Lindars). Mary, Jonathan and Tuan are also members of WHWB_US.
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