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Alexis Descatha

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Working longer goes with working in better conditions

Alexis Descatha^{a,b,*}

^aUniv Angers, CHU Angers, Univ Rennes, Inserm, EHESP, Irset (Institut de recherche en santé, environnement et travail) - UMR_S 1085, IRSET-ESTER, SFR ICAT, CAPTV CDC, Angers, France

^bDepartment of Occupational Medicine, Epidemiology and Prevention, Donald and Barbara Zucker School of Medicine, Hofstra/ Northwell, USA

In France, there is a major political and social debate on the retirement age. Extending the length of working time based on economic reasons is discussed with passion and strength. In addition of the question of retirement and health effect,¹ it might also be necessary to emphasize that a quantitative extension of work must be associated with an improvement of quality of working life.²

Indeed, World Health Organization and International Labor Organization have recently shown that working long hours are responsible for about one-third of the total estimated work-related burden of disease, and are the risk factor with the largest occupational disease burden.^{3,4} It is probably related to behaviors and situations caused by an excess of difficult working conditions, called in French “penibility” for arduous or laborious work (no exact translation).⁵ Such difficult working conditions are defined on factors – physical, chemical, biological and psychosocial-organizational – that expose the body to a premature aging.⁶ A global evaluation of factors has been tried but unfortunately with many limitations.⁷

However, France has an important network of occupational practitioners that might play a role in the valuation of such difficult working condition. With appropriate resources – mostly time and capacity to take action – they can prevent these difficult working conditions by advising employers, company stakeholders and workers themselves on how to reduce such factors of difficult working conditions. They also can detect a starting premature aging, often only visible too late. Use of decision support tools developed with agencies and translational occupational researchers, such as specific software,⁸ specific documents,⁹ job exposure matrices,¹⁰ might help them to fulfil this task.

In conclusion, we could wish that such complicated compromise would not increase health inequalities for

workers with difficult working conditions, in France or elsewhere. Improving difficult working conditions that cause premature aging, is the retirement keystone.

Declaration of interests

The author is paid within the affiliations mentioned, is also paid as the editor in chief of “les archives des maladies professionnelles et de l’environnement”, and is a board member of International Commission on Occupational Health (ICOH). The views expressed are those of the author alone and do not reflect those of the institutions listed above.

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*Univ Angers, CHU Angers, Univ Rennes, Inserm, EHESP, Irset (Institut de recherche en santé, environnement et travail) - UMR_S 1085, IRSET-ESTER, SFR ICAT, CAPTV CDC, Angers, France.

E-mail address: alexis.descatha@inserm.fr.

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