



# Embracing the future

**Fiona Kiernan** reports from the congress of the Federation of Occupational Health Nurses held in Spain

LAST September I was fortunate to win the INMO Occupational Health Section draw to attend the fifth Federation of Occupational Health Nurses of the European Union (FOHNEU) congress held in Tarragona, North Eastern Spain.

Along with nine other occupational health nurses from Ireland, I joined approximately 200 occupational health professionals and speakers from nearly all of the 27 EU member states and others from Australia, US and Singapore.

The theme of the three-day congress was 'Embracing the Future – Influencing Change'.

The results of the latest survey on the education, profile and status of occupational health nursing in the EU<sup>1</sup> were presented. This document also identified the main future challenges across the member states. Ireland's primary challenges were cited as: promoting increased awareness in the prevention of work-related illnesses, implementing the HSA's 'Workplace Health and Well Being Strategy' and involvement in the national focus on all aspects of workplace hazards.

Psychosocial risk factors in the workplace were highlighted as an ongoing issue of concern. One speaker cited evidence to show an increase in CVD in the remaining workforce in the two-

year period following a redundancy programme.<sup>2</sup>

Work-life balance issues were addressed by a speaker from the European agency Eurofound, which is based in Dublin.<sup>3</sup> Nightshift work was identified as one of the worst determinants of work life balance across Europe. A Danish speaker presented on the link between nightshift work and ill health with particular reference to breast cancer.<sup>4</sup>

More research into this topic was called for as 7% of European employees work permanent nightshifts and shift work is unavoidable in many sectors.

The impact of the aging workforce across Europe was addressed in several presentations.

The closing presentation was given by secretary general of the International Panel for Working Life.<sup>5</sup> This presentation highlighted the fact that while work-related injuries from accidents have declined in industrialised countries, occupationally induced illnesses continue to rise. This puts ever more focus on the role of occupational health nursing. Despite the economic downturn, legislators and employers must have a renewed emphasis on ensuring workers reach retirement safely and in good health.

Overall the prevailing message from the Congress was that the occupational

health nurse is central to both maintaining and promoting employee health with all of the benefits that this entails. However the value of the profession is often under recognised by employers. There was a call to increase the profession's profile across Europe through continuous education and by promoting the profession's presence regionally, nationally and internationally.

It was a privilege to attend the Congress and like all who attended I bought home a wealth of knowledge, resources and contacts that help occupational health nurses to provide our patients with the best of evidence-based care.

**Fiona Kiernan is an occupational health nurse at Masonite Ireland**

#### Speakers and topics

1. Education, profile and status of occupational health nursing in the European Union – Survey results 2012 (published on FOHNEU website). Panayota Sourtzi, associate professor in occupational health nursing, University of Athens, Greece and Julie Staun, president of FOHNEU, Denmark
2. The role of the occupational health nurse in economic crisis situations – downsizing. Strategies to prevent psychosocial risk factors. Ritva Partinen, OHN, Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Finland
3. Work-life balance. Gijsbertus Van Houten, Research Officer of Eurofound, Dublin, Ireland
4. Shiftwork and health. Johnni Hansen, PhD Head of occupational cancer, Institute of Cancer Epidemiology, Danish Cancer Society, Denmark
5. Future perspectives in occupational health and safety in the European Union. Dr Jukka Takala, executive director, Workplace Safety and Health Institute, Singapore. Website: [www.fohneu.org](http://www.fohneu.org)